

February 14, 1984

Trish

Since I hardly know you

I only got you this

When I know you better

Can I give you a kiss?

Michael

From my creative writing class below is a short story I wrote as part of a class exercise.

Written in Fall 1984 or Spring 1985

The sound of the whistle blowing sent the men back into the mines, like Pavlov's dogs salivating when a bell rings. Only the men were not doing it because of positive reinforcement, as in the dog's case. They were answering the call to work because they know what will happen if they do not.

Dexter Semptil was such a man. When he was nine years old he started working in the mines to pay off the family debt. Back then, he remembered as he climbed into the tunnel, work was easier. There was no mandatory thirteen hour work days as there is now. The debt twenty years ago was much lower, but as time marched on the interest on the debt led to a quadrupling of the original debt. It is now so large that most families have had to sell almost everything they own to the state.

Donning the necessary safety equipment, he propelled his rig into the deep shaft, alone in his assigned tunnel and with a heavy quota to meet. At the end of a day's work, each worker is expected to yield 16 1/2 tons of ore a day. Those who did not meet the quota stayed until they met it. If they reached quota early, the Overseers raised it higher to keep them working. The management just raised Dexter's quota to 20 3/4 tons a day, because he usually works beyond the necessary tonnage; a practice the authorities do not like. As the ground shook beneath the rig, Dexter powered the drills at the front router. Mechanically, he eased forward on the thrust as the drill bit into the wall of rock, boring a huge hole. The process spewed a great cloud of ash and dust. Though no more than usual, his low resistance and the nearly twenty years of enduring the soot had taken their toll on him. He began coughing violently.

"I'm getting too old for this," he muttered. He tasted the fine particles of chondrite inundating his mouth. The grit nearly made him gag. "Get out of 'em what you can while you can," he murmured remembering the mine motto. He spit on the floor of his cabin disrespectfully.

"Semptil!" bellowed the radio. "What's the holdup?"

Damn those Overseers, thought Dexter. They saw him take a break. Quickly, he made up a good excuse for his rest.

"There's something wrong with the water jets. They're not cutting down on the dust like they should," he lied.

"Do not screw with us Semptil! We can see via the remote that the unit is functioning. However, if you claim it is not working, then working it is not," the Overseer proclaimed as it remotely turned off the dust inhibitor.

Angrily, Dexter powered up the drill and rammed it into the rock, spewing dust and soot in quantities that he had never experienced. The sediment quickly overloaded the filters, and they clogged. Cut off from air, Dexter collapsed.

Minutes later, revived, he found himself looking at a meditech. "What happened?" he asked.

"You suffered from chondritic inhalation and near asphyxiation," the technician answered stoically. "But there is a bonus for you. You get to go home and see your kid, without pay, of course."

"But you know what will happen," protested Dexter.

"Yes, but you need the rest. You only have two weeks left until you retire. No one else has ever made it this far. Don't blow it. You can always,...well, anyway, go home and see your kid. That's an order," commanded the master medical technician.

Too exhausted to protest, Dexter rose and was led to the transport waiting to take him home.

Later, as he looked down upon the landscape, the scars of the cataclysmic battle that took place nearly fifty years ago still pockmark the planet. With the colonial entry approaching, a smile slowly crept across Dexter's face. He is going to see his son for the first time in weeks. The anticipation of seeing his son was great. Happily, he slowed his craft to a stop and exited it. Carefully, so as not to make any noise, he entered through the back door and tip-toed to the study to see the day's messages. As he read them, his joy turned to depression. Being three months late on the mandatory revenue enhancement duty, he hoped the state would not find out about his not working a full day. They had, and it was clearly spelled out what they expected of him. Dexter somberly poured himself a drink.

Unexpectedly, his five years old son, Jimmy, jumped into the study, startling Dexter. "Boo!" yelled his son.

"Don't you ever do that again," he scolded the child who had nearly caused a heart attack.

"I'm sorry," sulked Jimmy.

"Hey, that's all right," comforted Dexter. "Aren't you going to give me a hug?" he invited tenderly.

Dexter squeezed his son lovingly, preparing himself for what he had to do. "Isn't it past your bedtime?" he asked.

"Yes," admitted Jimmy.

"Well, go upstairs and I'll be up in a minute to tuck you in, O. K?"

"O. K.," said his son who bounded up the stairs.

Dexter gained his composure for what he needed to do. He went up to Jimmy's room and tucked his son in.

"Daddy, will you tell me a bedtime story? You're much better than mommy," confessed the kid.

His means set, Dexter prepared his son. "Once upon a time," he began. "Not too long ago, there was a planet, not unlike ours, which faced hard times. The people were desperate. Things were so bad they elected a mean and terrible leader, though they didn't know he was so bad at first. Ornako promised them many, many things, and that he would fix everything right. And do you know what he did?" coached Dexter.

"No," was all Jimmy said.

"He made everything all right. Food and resources once scarce were now plentiful. Energy was given to all for free. Great cities were built, and he began construction of the largest fleet the galaxy had seen. But he got that stuff in an evil way. He took from others whole systems, never kept his word with the other planets, and started an interstellar war, killing lots of people."

"What happened?" asked the kid, now fully wrapped up in the story.

"Well, he was so bad that his former allies and all of the other systems banded together and formed an alliance against Ornako and his people. Eventually Ornako, who once had seven stars in his control, was beaten back to his capitol planet, where a great and horrific battle took place."

"Wow," uttered his son. "Who won?"

"The others did, and they wrecked the planet so much that no being can exist on its surface. But that's not all. Not only did they take back all of the stolen systems, they also demanded that the people who followed Ornako should pay for all of the damage he caused. So those who were left were forced to work hard for the state to pay the debt the state owed the others systems. And do you know what happens to those who can not work?" Dexter asked his son .

"I don't know?" was the honest reply.

"They take kids as payment for the debt, to be used as miners," Dexter paused, waiting for signs of comprehension from his son.

"What planet is that on?" asked the son.

"Ours," was his fathers answer as two uniformed guards broke through the front door and raced up the stairs to Jimmy's room.

"We're here to take the kid..."

<from April 13-16, 1986, found April 1988>

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Who thought he was such a toughy

One day he sent out his forces

But to no surprise,

They might as well have been windowpanes

In the face of our superior planes

Chorus

Yeah, Qadaffi is a man, yes he is

Who else could we get away with calling names

Moon 'em more Clodhopper is a madman

Why else would Jimmy C call him a polecat

He and his state sponsored terrorism

Sparked Reagan to call him a barbarian

So what in turn should we do?

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We opened a new chapter in Voyage to the bottom of the sea

Our Tomcats and Intruders

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He bombed Berlin in April

We had to strike back

<the battle involved bombing his tent and house where he lived>

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Back in ancient times

Tribes waged war for many things

For the cost of but a few dozen lives

To the victors went

The victim's wives

Then as people began to settle down

They accumulated wealth

Etc.

Wars were fought to spread it around

That was before the atomic bomb

Now

All the humans are gone

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Typed August 20, 1997

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CHAPTER ONE

"Good morning, this is Central American Moon CV, where the sun always shines and it never rains. It is Monday, October 30, 2041. Your Monday wake up weather is stellar lit and arid, with a high temperature of 228 degrees, and a low temperature of minus 200 in the shade. The Lunar Weather Service has issued a severe dust alert due to

increased activity at the Brahe Strip Mine, so keep your transports on automatic drive. We'll be back with today's top stories you won't want to miss after these many commercials," warned the morning compuvision jockey, Art Ramanzki.

I, Paul Jaffrin, immediately muted the sound and began my morning ritual. I arose from my bed, tied my robe around my waist, and hopped to the bathroom to make a deposit. As I sat there reviewing my day's schedule as displayed by my pocom (pocket computer), I hoped I would not be finished with the task until after the last of the commercials were aired. With the cost of lunar living so high, the networks had to sell 35 minutes of ads per hour, or six minutes of commercials for every five minutes of programming. I had enough of advertising the day Proctor & Gamble emblazoned in neon bright enough to be seen from Earth their corporate logo on the near side of the moon. My task complete, I cleaned myself off and turned the volume up to listen to the news.

"Earth's top stories today; the body count climbs as a record number of homicides in American cities occurs overnight; New Detroit Mayor Jubatku declares war against his neighbors and other major cities follow suit; the Larger-Eurasian Union (LEA) denounces the Greater United States (GUS) for it's action in sinking LEA naval vessels in the Caribbean; millions of starving Zambians invade Angola in yet another desperate attempt at survival; the civil war in Mexico widens as the Pan-American States seek involvement; killer insects drive townspeople from their homes across the midwest; and finally, the last Philippine units lay down their arms to the conquering Chinese army."

"When we return, we'll have the details on these and other news for your morning displeasure," said the announcer with a wry smirk.

I have been at my lunar unit for three years, and have heard only news items that gave me no pleasure. I muted the incessant commercials, and begun the task of shaving. I looked at myself in the mirror, reflecting my face that itself was reflectant of the sad times I had escaped from by coming to this, my lunar home. In just three years, my face has developed wrinkles around my mouth, eyes, and forehead. I noticed the first hint of gray hairs streaking through my long, well kept, formerly homogeneously brown hair. My bulging abdomen flowed out over my pants, thanks to my recent weight gain of over forty pounds. I frowned sullenly. Had they been there all along and I was so vain as not to notice them before, or did I never really look at myself in the mirror. Or was it that only now did I spend the time to do so? Regardless, I picked up the rechargeable shaver and quickly trimmed the overnight's growth of beard and mustache stubble. Having completed this simple task, I continued with interest to listen to the news.

"Once again, our top story is the record overnight homicide rate in American cities. Our correspondent in New Detroit is Jamie Bihop."

"Good morning Art," she, accompanied by sporadic small arms fire, greeted the host then turned toward the camera. "Once again, America leads the world with a record 1300 murders last night. New Detroit ranked worst in the nation, as traditional Devils Nights shootings claimed 175 victims in a twelve hour period. Of those victims, 124 were under the age of 17. No arrests have been made as yet, but this city-state has sealed it's borders to outsiders, and the mayor is spurring the depraved residents to

fight their neighboring suburbs instead of themselves, in effect declaring war against greater Michigan by saying, and I quote, 'we have every right to satisfy the inequities forced upon us by the repressors surrounding us'. The Governor has declared a state of emergency. The National Guard has been sent not into the city to protect the citizens here, rather instead they have been sent to the border to enforce that no one from inside gets out. And in a repeat of the Chicago riots a year ago, the citizens of New Detroit have heeded their leaders call and taken arms and moved toward the border. Several citizens not of New Detroit have been beaten to death with flashlights, which next to .38 specials are the weapons of choice here. I interviewed one rampager and asked the youth why flashlights were being used."

"Is tha cym-bole, yo cee, of tha re-pression of tha afro-amerikans here. We juz given back ta them what thay've done ta uz all theaze yearz," said a teenager whom was so unintelligible that I had to read the subtitles that were provided (thankfully).

The reporter shook her head apprehensively a bit before continuing, struggling to understand where the youth before her was coming from. "What do you feel was the spark for this uprising?" She asked.

"Thatz ea-zy. It all began 'for I waz born, with Rodnay Kang, Malice Green, and Louis Farrakan," he said as he held up his flashlight threateningly. "This is how they died, thay were beat-in by the kops, by the govern-mant, by the white man," he swung his flashlight hard against his hand with a loud slap. "Now yo gonna pay, " he yelled as he ran away (to smash the reporter's windows on her trans, although unbeknownst to her).

"I talked with Mayor Jubatku just moments ago, and this is what he had to say."

The prerecorded news bite was played, and opened with the compuvision camera panning around the room. The Mayor's Office was typically run down as in most formerly industrialized but now zero populated zoned urban areas. Many flags of African nations draped limply from their poles behind the mayor. A United Nations flag was displayed, higher than all others. Conspicuously absent were the American and State of Michigan Flags. On the recycled plywood simulation oak desk the City of New Detroit Seal was displayed. The seal was resplendent in sights of southern Africa, with a red sun setting (or was it rising?) above Mt. Kilimanjaro, a conical glassine structure at the base of the mountain, two lions looking toward the top of the building, and upon close observation, I could detect a family, consisting of four adults and seven children, all in traditional African garb, making their way on a path that led to the top of the mountain.

Numerous potted exotic plants from the sub-continent struggled to grow, as the grenade proof glass was so thick not much light filtered into the room. The reinforced and barred windows were straddled by red, orange, green, and white drapes, all with black and brown sashes. A mural made from tile was centered on the floor just before the mayoral desk, but the renaissance message of hope and coexistence along with the paint had faded away and was barely visible. Now only dark grit covered the floor upon which the mayor and a dozen of his personal guards were standing. The mayor was a big man, 6'2", 265 pounds or more. He wore contacts when dealing with business leaders, and only glasses when he saw "his people". He wore the traditional clothing

when appropriate, which was whenever the public saw him. He was one of the few mayors in America that had actually been to his native land, which he traced all the way back to Rwanda. Otherwise, when by himself or with business or government officials, he wore more conservative clothing. However, for purposes of the interview, he was wearing his best traditional garb, he knew his people were watching and he strengthened the bond with them whenever he could.

"Thank you for allowing me the opportunity to express our issues on this matter," began Mayor Jubatku diplomatically. "First of all, this activity should come as no surprise to anyone that listens to newstapes or watches CV. The precursors have been growing louder and louder for decades. There have been tremors all across America, with the slayings of innocent people by vigilante enforcers, beatings by police of anyone who looks at them wrong, secret investigations, wiretappings, surveillance and set-ups of anyone suspected of breaking laws that we the people had forced down our throat by the government. The government quit working for us at the turn of the millennium, and has been working against us for four decades, ever since Welfare was ended. People like Ollie North, G. Gordon Liddy, Phil Sandies, Mark Fhurman, David Middleton, Brian Taylor, and Ted Hudhji served notice to the public that the government will do whatever it wants, the constitution be damned. No longer is a person considered innocent until proven guilty. Just carrying a handgun now gets a mandatory prison term, or at least it used to until I unilaterally repealed that law as part of my emergency decree this morning. In my city, the government has the gall to fly in here with their shinny new trans and to impose martial law six months ago. Nearly 8,000 civilians have 'mysteriously' disappeared or were found shot in the head as if they committed suicide.

Eight thousand people out of a city of 800,000 killing themselves? I think not. As the mayor of this city, I could not allow my people to be murdered. I have to stand up for those who would not dare to do so themselves. And I have. Here, in my city, there's been a moderate quake. There's still time to avoid the big one folks. If you want to preserve this nation of ours, you should hear our demands and make some fast changes, or its the big one- I'm talking revolution people. And don't think this is just a white verses black thing - its a those who have not against those who do, it don't mater what your color is, if you're poor and tired of it, then its time to rise, take arms, and march against those who seek to keep us down!" He seethed with emotion, sweat pouring off his brow.

The camera panned from the mayor to the reporter, who looked very nervous. "We'll be right back after these messages," she said.

My housebot Pete informed me that I had a call. I bounded up from my seat at the all purpose table to retrieve my pocom. I queried who was asking for a viewing and was informed it was Linda Reynolds. I granted access and was greeted by her sullen face.

"Good morning Linda, how are you?" I asked enthusiastically, eager to see her at anytime.

"Have you seen the news?" She asked gravely.

"You mean about New Detroit?" I asked making an educated guess.

"Yeah, and we have to meet about it ASAP," she said with an obvious note of urgency in her voice.

"O.K., our usual time and place?" I asked for confirmation that we will meet at her place at 11:00.

"Well, if you can make it a C later, I hear the eery has little ones," she said in code.

It had been awhile since I had to use any code, so I took a few seconds as my brain raced through the various phrases and what they meant. Eventually, after much effort of gray matter, I came upon the decipherment of what she had said. It meant she had company over right now and they would not be leaving until after lunch. "Will you cook me some halibut anyway?" I responded in code, agreeing to the later time.

"Sure, that sounds fine to me, too," she said politely.

"Great, I can't wait to see you. I'll be there soon honey," I said lovingly.

"I love you too," she said as she discontinued the call with a kiss.

I quickly computed how long it would take to get to her place. I glanced at my pocom displaying 0720 C.L.T. (Central Lunar Time). I leaped off my chair and headed for the shower, listening with interest to the continuing morning coverage of events.

"The reluctant guards have favored retreating rather than, as one guardsman put it, fire upon our brethren kind. This concludes my report of today's top story, this is Jamie Bihop, in New Detroit."

"Continuing with the rest of the news..."

Several hours later, I arrived at the door to her house that I was intimately familiar with, and was let in after a passionate kiss by Linda Reynolds. She led me by the hand to the kitchen table, where she had prepared some wonderfully aromatic home made spaghetti. I took my seat next to her, ready to caress her beautiful thighs as we ate together.

Next to me was the intimately familiar Linda Reynolds. Her shinning blue eyes I loved to gaze into, long, wavy, orangish-blond hair, a sensual full face, softer than any other, untouched and unmarred by the effects of makeup, her full tasty lips I yearn to kiss that often left my lips tingling for hours afterwards, her playful and moist hands I loved to caress, her full and perfect breasts I loved to nibble on and lick between, and the rest of her fantastically moist, soft, and warm body that often lifted me off the couch and threw me onto the floor to ride above me, and her carefree persona, did much to hide her true brilliance and power from others. Only a handful of people knew her true identity; not even her husband, the distinguished Doctor Louie LaSalle. I consider myself so fortunate to not only know her, but to be taken in by her magnificent beauty, warmth and caring, and her intellect. The times between our infrequent rendezvous with each other made me long for her ever more so with each day apart.

We had met several years before, at a rather exciting governmental function. Her then fiancée Dr. LaSalle was lecturing enthusiastically about a breakthrough in

Enhanced Primitive Correspondence (EPC). He literally created the field of Intra-Phylum Subauditive Correspondence (often referred to as yps-c). His fascinating introduction into the first tentative success at neural networked artificial communication not only between species but between phylums was remarkable, and earned the good doctor a Nobel prize. During the short recesses between his presentation, Linda, Michael (my brother), myself, and several others of the secret Unification Commission discussed many things, and Linda and I immediately hit it off. We were all in our early thirties, and yet each of us held high positions in government. All of us shared one common goal, and the commission has held annual meetings ever since. This was to be the first non-scheduled emergency meetings, the first of many we would have over the years.

"So, you have a taste for fish again today, Pauly," she teased, smiling invitingly.

"As I always do when around you," I confirmed, wiping my mustache in an after taste kind of motion. "And how about you dear, want some raw oysters?" I gripped my glass of champagne like a hose, facing it towards her mouth.

"Pauly," she giggled softly and blew me a kiss, her eyes closed, highlighting her blue tipped eyelashes. "We're supposed to be here on business, not pleasure," she changed her demeanor noticeably.

I reached over, kissed her gently underneath her jaw (which she loved to the accompaniment of a slight moan, an noticeable increase in heart rate, and a quiet softly

spoken thank you). "Its always a pleasure when I'm with you," I whispered into her ear while gently giving her inner thigh a number of caresses.

"Pauly, not today, " she whispered wantingly yet firmly.

I kissed her gently again and leaned back into my chair, continuing to caress her thigh and looking deep into her beautiful blue eyes. It was very hard (yes) for me to return to the business at hand whilst we held each other's moist hands, gazing into each other's eyes as lovers do. But for a long few minutes while the spaghetti got cold, we just caressed hands and remembered the so many happy times together.

She was the first to let go. "That's enough Paul, we have too much to discuss today," she said.

"O.K., so what's going on? I didn't get a chance to finish listening to the news this morning. Are we going to war with the L.E.A.?" I asked.

"Its anyone's guess," she offered. "You were at the last meeting. Their representatives to the commission didn't indicate that the Pan American States meant kaka to them."

"Well, that was before we sank their nuclear powered carrier. I'm surprised Washington's still intact," I said sarcastically.

"IS it?" She said as she loved to play with my mind.

I smiled at the jest. "This is not what we need," I said shaking my head. "How is this going to bring our goal any closer?" I asked not knowing the answer.

"It'll work itself out as all things will, in due time," she expressed hopeful.

"You think so?" I asked for support.

"I know so," she said as she grasped my hands with her moist ones and squeezed reassuredly. "In fact, some of us within the foundation already see our seeds coming to fruition."

"New Detroit?" I surmised.

"That's right. And not just there. We have people all over the globe, below, and above it. Its only a matter of time Paul," she smiled. "And its time for you to play a bigger role in the scheme of things," she said, caressing my hands beneath the table again.

My mind turned to...well you know. As I thought again of doing her, I was struck by how often I'd have to, to put it delicately, do favors for her, after we made love with each other. She was the best I'd ever had, and she paid for all my expenses (meals, fuel, etc.) and gave me bonuses (in more ways than one). But I somehow felt as if I was being used to gain intelligence, and that she was using sex with me for her own gain. Her marriage to her husband was a rocky one, and had stood on the verge of divorce several times. At such points I offered marriage to her. But she would not marry me and give up the prestige of being married to a world renown doctor. And there was the lame excuse that if we married one of us would have to quit the foundation, and the world would be a better place if we were able to work together towards our common goal. But my offer still stands, should she one day accept the world of love that I offer. It is an offer I have made to no one else through my entire life - before or since.

I removed my hands from her grasp and placed my hands across my belly. "A bigger role? Just how BIG did you mean?" I teased.

Linda thought of a quick comeback but repressed the shot. She became all business now. "How does World Outlook, Section Under controller, Fourth Class sound?" She whispered softly.

Under controller? It sounded like a dream. Only those in the Congress could offer such positions, and her offering it to me indicated there was still much that she was hiding from me. "Wow, this sounds great," I beamed with joy. "What are my Subsections to be?"

"In keeping with your brother's background, weather, in keeping with your background, aerospace, in keeping with our goal, diplomacy and quantum thinking, and in keeping with my goal, 'special'," she whispered the last word enticingly.

"Special? What's that?" I asked fairly sure I had caught the context.

"You know what I mean," she giggled as she gave my cock a playful tug.

"Ah," was all I could mutter as a smile swept across my face.

Just then the computer rang. Linda had a rather untimely way of answering it just when we were in the middle of making love to each other. A lesser man's feelings might have been hurt by such actions, but I was self assure.

"Linda here," she said unassumingly.

"Hi Linda," said the male's deep voice. "And I see you have Mr. Jaffrin with you as well. Good, we need both of you via compulink in three minutes for an emergency session of the council. I take it you've briefed Paul on his commission into the upper echelons of the foundation?" The man's demeanor was terse.

"Mission accomplished," she replied professionally.

"Good. Have your thinking caps on for this one, events are spinning out of control and we may need to strike prematurely. See you in two-forty," said the man as he disconnected the link.

Linda and I exchanged worried looks. Both of us had seen the situation in New Detroit coming years in advance. The foundation had planted agents there a few years ago to take control of the situation when the demand arose. We wondered what had gone wrong to cause this unprecedented emergency session of the prime council. We held hands tightly as we awaited the opening of the teleconference.

The screen came to life, split into five sections, each section displaying a varying number of people of all ethnic origins. The secret organization called the United Earth Foundation was made up of tens of thousands of academics, business leaders, congressmen, conservatives, diplomats, engineers, generals, idealists, militarists, politicians, and scientists from the world over. All were closely associated with the United Nations, and all dreamed of a successor to that organization, one that united all the global alliances together into one pangea of nations. But there were many forces

acting against such an alliance. The two world's superpowers - the L.E.A. and the Greater United States were at odds with each other and with themselves. Increasingly, the balkinization of the Greater United States occurred at a faster and faster pace. While the G.U.S. was mostly preoccupied with its own backyard, the Larger Euro-Asian Union was becoming more militaristic and expansionistic. Neither of these two world dominators sought to have global union. Both sides feared the loss of national leadership and the weight of global domination over themselves. Constituents of both refused to recognize the UN flag, and openly burned it. Some fanatic and paranoid organizations believed the UN was seeking a takeover and would impose global laws eliminating various freedoms they enjoyed. Although they are wrong, they are also strong. The governments refused to disarm the militias during the '90s, and they have now grown into a paramilitary force outnumbering the G.U.S. military, and are threatening political assassinations, kickbacks, and outright murder of those politicians whose view point is opposite their own. Fortunately, there are some in the U.S. who saw the danger inherent in armed paramilitary forces roaming the country at will, free to spout their outrageous anti-government views. Al Severly is one such man. As head of the Joint Chiefs of Staff for three administrations, he has warned each on the dangers the militias pose. But as each President had received support from them, it was inevitable nothing would be done. At various times limited measures were debated concerning the absolute need for gun control in America. Of the need to restrict the control and possession of handguns, most Americans agreed. And yet, with every bill introduced into the Congress to protect the lives of the country's citizens. the National Rifle Association (NRA) and it's congressmen blocked such progress at all

opportunities. And the so called pro-lifers, the anti-abortionists, in an ultimate act of hypocrisy, distanced themselves from the campaign to enact gun control. Although most people favored maintaining arms used for hunting purposes only, no mandate providing that most obvious of solution to the rampant murder rate - of limiting the sale of weapons to single shot weapons such as rifles and shotguns and restricting the sale of specialty bullets, would prevail in the NRA's majority hold of Congress. Not to mention the unconstitutionality of the subject. That and the strict interpretlists on the United States Supreme Court edicted that the Constitution states arms may be beared and does not specify what such arms may be (which I think is a loophole that does allow for the kind of gun control needed - its people's easy access to such weapons that allows people to kill people). Now, with the inner cities in open revolt, there was only one way of to secure the peace. And to do so would result in an open declaration of war against the militias and the revision of the Constitution (which has been revised 26 times over the course of America's history). The last candidate to effectively pursue such policy was assassinated along with most of his supporters by a car bomb parked outside the democratic party headquarters. So in dealing with insane people as such, it behooved oneself to remain as tight lipped as possible in public. Thus, through intimidation and actual carrying out of threats, the Greater U.S. had lost the most important freedom the Constitution guarantees-the freedom of speech. It is thus that the United Earth Foundation is a secret organization, whose leader is underground, unknown to everyone, and not to be revealed until the time for unity is at hand. Al Severly knew from the way the situation was playing itself out, that it was not yet time to reveal his master's identity. He also knew that the organization had to act fast, or the

goal of uniting Earth will be delayed by another generation. He had no time to prepare a speech, only enough time to appraise himself of the situation. And it alarmed him enough to call this unusual meeting. Satisfied all was present, he quickly started.

"My distinguished guests," he began, "we are at a cross roads for this organization, one which I fear bodes poorly for the future of the planet." He paused, took a deep breath, and began anew. "I know that you have been watching the news of late, and in particular, that which pertains to New Detroit et al. We have been watching the situation in New Detroit for the past thirteen years. We all knew what happened would eventually do so, and yet, we tried to take steps to maintain control once the whole place erupted. As you know, New Detroit has just declared itself a separate city-state within Michigan. The general populace, which is the most highly segregated community in America, has taken up arms and marched against their neighboring white and wealthy suburbs. Unfortunately, we could not have foreseen the actions that have been undertaken by the militias. While the National Guard was sent in to the suburbs to protect them, they have refused to fight (unlike the 1960's when the guard beat hundreds of civilians). So, the militias, acting as their survivalist ancestor, have moved in and commenced battle with the invaders from New Detroit. Here's our problem. We have two combatants, each heavily armed and nearly equal in numbers, facing each other in densely populated civilian corridors, ready to kill without mercy anything they perceive to be the enemy. And in the militia's case, that includes the national guard units. The Mayor of New Detroit has placed a request to the United Nations to send forces to protect his city. But doing so would infuriate the militia even more and serve to swell their ranks, surely not something we want to see happen. Thus, the question is, how do we deal

with this open revolution without causing a major civil war in the process? The question is open for debate and I ask for your comments," directed Al Severly.

No one offered anything for a seemingly long few minutes.

"I think we need to look at the underlining root of the conflict," spoke a deep voiced black man I recognized as being Dexter Semptat. "I think the mayor did a good job explaining his side of things, although I disagree with him about it being only a rich against poor thing. Looking at the geopolitical statistics of the region, its clear racism is at play here, but not the kind you might think. After the '68 riots, whites left the city by the bushel. Concurrent with white flight was the development of the freeway system, which allowed them to live far away and yet commute to work. The flight continued from the city through the '90s, those that could get away did so. Those that were left behind due to economic reasons were soon to pay a high price for their poverty. By the mid 1990s 95% of the city's populace was black."

"The past two generations have grown up in this unfavorable environment. Poverty is all they have known. Well, that and crime. Crime has become the biggest employer, if you will, of the inner city. Kids carry guns into school unpunished. Kids are the biggest killers per capita of any age group. Kids are the biggest pushers and dealers. Why? Its because they have no value system, no concept of value of life. During the '10s, the Republican platform offered the explanation that this was a cultural problem, that the Afro-American simply could not adjust to western culture and ideals. As a result, they turned their backs on the inner cities, with disastrous results. Seeing the social welfare and urban development moneys as a drain on an deficit ridden budget, they gutted the

budget of all authorizations to the inner cities - from HUD to welfare to education to freeway repair. The cities plunged into economic chaos. With no jobs (other than crime), no city services (buses, garbage pickup, street lights, etc.), closed education centers, a pattern of misery and hopelessness erupted throughout all cities. Without a job, no income, no education, the concept of self esteem and self worth collapsed. And it is all too easy to deny others of their self worth, or even their life if, you yourself have none. Thus, all the elements for a revolution have existed in New Detroit since 2010. Could we have stopped this when we had the chance, or was it too late by the time the authorities took notice?"

Those present shook their heads in understanding and regret.

"I know I'm new here," I apologized for breaking the silence. "But shouldn't the question be what are we going to do to contain this now, not what could have been done by past political leaders?" I offered.

"That is correct," agreed Al.

"The first thing we need to concern ourselves with is the containment of this situation before it spreads throughout greater America," said a voice with great authority.

"That's the Unifier," whispered Linda in my ear.

"The Unifier?" The phrase meant nothing to me yet.

"He is our great leader, the one who will someday unite us all and send us to the stars," she again whispered softly.

"Who is he?" I asked.

"No one knows," she lied tactfully and skillfully.

My mind tried to visualize an organization as large as the UEF being led by some unseen, unknown leader. I couldn't fathom it. It didn't make sense to me. "Oh," was all I said.

The Unifier's voice continued to speak. "...Al, what's your tactical assessment of the battlefield?"

A Global Imaging and Positioning System (GIPS) satellite photo was displayed on everyone's screen. "Our agents inside New Detroit have had no success at pleading for non-violence. Thus, we are unsure of the exact disposition and strength of their units, such as they are. According to the latest Gips, taken 15 minutes ago, there are three groups of approximately 90,000 each arranged in semi-strategic locations around the city's perimeter. One group is engaged in the Farmington-Novl area pillaging the wealthy homes and businesses in that area. Another group has invaded near the Dearborn area, and the third group has infiltrated the Roseville area. All of these civilians are armed with some kind of weapon, mostly handguns. Their tactics are completely haphazard, lacking any centralized control. As a result, some units have fought amongst themselves over what each deemed to be their turf."

"The self proclaimed Michigan Militia is forming up near Fowlerville to the west of the city, Romulus to the south of the city, Warren to the north, and a reserve unit is forming near Wolverine. The Militia is heavily armed, with rifles, semiautomatic and automatic

weapons, a few old howitzers, some LAWS, grenades, and mines. The forces in direct combat - the Warren Roseville border has resulted in a massacre of the New Detroit civilians. The militia is utilizing strike deep tactics, shooting first and asking questions later. With their rifles, they have picked off the invaders well before they themselves are within range of their handguns and shotguns. Also, they are controlled by Squadron commanders, issuing orders over CB and sideband radios. Once the other militias are deployed in place, we can look forward to complete decimation of the New Detroit civilians," he said somberly.

"Are you saying that the rioters will all die?" Asked an unidentified female voice.

"We are looking at possibly the largest genocide since Bosnia," issued Al.

"As an African national, I implore you Unifier to do something to save my brothers," urged Dexter Semptat.

Cries of agreement went out over the compulink.

"Can't we send in the guard as a buffer between the two forces?" Asked someone.

"The guard is already in place," brushed aside Al. "They are refusing to subdue the rioters and are avoiding areas of combat."

"Can't we force them to intervene?" Asked another.

"We could replace the commander on the scene, but all that would do is strengthen their attachment to the 'repressed' rioters, causing them themselves to possibly turn on their side."

"Wouldn't that be a way to save the rioters -if the guard was on their side?"

"Sure, that would save the rioters, but then we'd have a bigger problem- that of the militia. They hate the government as it is. They would see this as an example of government interference in an internal state affair."

"What about sending federal troops in?"

"That is the absolute last thing we can do," cautioned the Unifier. "It would set off the militias all over the country, and we'd have an open insurrection against our government."

"Don't you think that once word gets out of New Detroit's charge of the light brigade that the other cities will be sparked into doing the same?"

"What, commit suicide? As uneducated as these people are, I don't think they'll all jump into the abyss," countered Linda.

"I disagree Linda, these people have nothing to lose and everything to gain by revolting," countered Jari Talea.

"They have everything to lose - their lives," countered Bruce Davidson, the director of the FBI.

"Not all the militias are as strong as Michigan's," offered Al.

"So some other cities might have more luck wrecking mayhem and damaging everything?"

"If we can save this situation, maybe the other cities won't revolt?" offered Bruce.

"I agree," confessed the Unifier.

"So, once again, the question becomes, what do we do?"

There were no suggestions for a few minutes.

"If we sent in the U.N., I suppose that too would set off the militias," I offered.

"Absolutely," confirmed Al.

"What about utilizing the national guard troops that are already there, and having them disarm 'everyone'," offered Linda.

"The militia wouldn't like it and would resist," protested Al.

"As long as the militia is armed, we must maintain arms," announced Dexter.

"Besides, you would in effect be violating the 2nd and 4th Articles of the Bill of Rights."

"We're going to have to do away with the 2nd anyway sooner or later if we want to get a grip on crime," suggested John Lasjurski, the head of the ATF.

"But under the state constitution, the governor, in a state of emergency, which, he's already declared, can do just that," moved Linda.

"I don't know, I think the militias in other states might move in to Michigan and try to stage a coup at the capitol," worried Al.

"But, if they do that, then we can send in the federal troops and deal with the militia once and for all," I offered.

"I agree we must have the militia out of the way before our goal of a unified Earth can be accomplished," admitted the Unifier.

"I think I see your point Paul," accepted Al. "If we make it look like the militias are the aggressors, as they are, and we make them strike first, then we will have the moral duty to intervene in the conflict with the regular army.

"I must caution, however, that such an declaration of war will lead to great turmoil in America, and we must all be cognizant of the potential for terrorist attacks," cautioned Jari.

"True, I think we can look to the '90s as an example of the brutality the militias are capable of, with the Oklahoma City and Sears Tower bombings," put forth Bruce.

"Those were acts of individuals, not of the organizations themselves," decried an unidentified individual.

"Regardless of whether they were officially sanctioned by the militias or not, those individuals were members of those groups, and hence they are dangerous," stated John.

"Are we prepared to lose federal buildings of significance to crazy son of bitches who operate at the extreme fringe of reality and civility?" Asked another.

"We only prolong the time to destruction if we do not act now," I countered. "No war is without risk. No war should be fought when there is an unacceptable level of risk. But I foresee a future where these militias will exercise such political coercion that we will never see our goal come to fruition without major, and I mean apocalyptic, damage to society as a whole unless we act now! We must act, and not just in New Detroit. Once these other militias mobilize and strike against those poor from the cities, we have the moral duty to wipe them out hard and fast. The sooner we get this done, the sooner we can help the cities and their poor rebuild and see our goal of unification accomplished!" I said vehemently.

Troubled silence met my proposal. Through everyone's mind lay the risks of doing nothing, and of going in full force now. I was reminded of a quotation from President Kennedy some 80 years before. "*We do these things not because they are easy, but because they are hard.*" Different circumstances and context then, but equally as relevant now.

"So, is it agreed that I request the Governor to order the guard to begin to disarm the citizens on both sides?" Asked the Unifier for collaboration.

A polling subroutine was displayed on all the deskcoms. Each person carefully weighed the historical significance of what was about to happen before casting their vote. In the end, the measure passed by a wide margin.

"Thank you for your support. I know that this action will bring great pain and misery to the citizens of the Greater United States. To use the words of the Constitution of our great country, this must be done *in order to form a more perfect union*."

The screen went blank, leaving Linda and I in silence, still holding hands.

Only Al Severly was still active on the compulink. "Paul," he started. "We've got you a post with the National Security Agency's Orbital Station Zenith. I knew how much you love to fly, so I pulled a few strings with our top operative at the 'store'. There, they'll put you in charge of a squad of '**Eagles**'. Be there in two days. Linda has everything you need to get up to speed," he said as Linda stealthily handed me a disk of briefing material.

"Thank you," I gleamed, eager to fly the new '**Eagles**'.

"Severly out," he said as he terminated the link.

I flipped the disk repeatedly over in my hands, listening intently to every word Linda had to tell me. I was entering an unfamiliar world. A world of subterfuge, intrigue, and danger. I will have to call on all my military training, my understanding of human nature, my innate skills such as keen awareness of my surroundings, fast, clear, logical, and quantum thinking, and above all instinct. A set of skills and reactions underdeveloped, if

not repressed, by years of desk riding for the government will have to be brought out. It was disquieting, yet exciting. This woman across from me, of whom I knew so much of and shared a love as with no one else, lived a dangerous life between two worlds, the second of which I knew nothing about. What was I getting myself into, I wondered, as I lay my head against her chest, to the sound and pressure of her quickly beating heart.

CHAPTER TWO

The dandelion laden field glinted with the reflection of a fluorescent lamp off the dew on the flora's leaves inside the biosphere. An adult bee was dancing and talking to one son out of at least a hundred, outside the main hive. Both bees were of the killer variety that had virtually replaced most of the indigenous non-stinging honey bees throughout America.

"Yep, it was a terrible day," remarked the old bee, its pheromones heavy with the smell of remorse.

"How terrible?" Asked the newly hatched pupa.

"Bee, it was the worst nightmare imaginable. Most of we bees died in the first day that we were trapped by the slow moving, oddly soft skinned bipeds. Only a few of us managed to survive their entrapment."

"Tell me more," asked the youngster inquisitively.

"Well, the first couple of sunbeats we did O.K. After a while, we got hungry. That didn't create a problem for us bees, though, because we only eat nectar. But some of our hated arthropods only eat meat, and by meat, I mean other insecti."

"You mean insecti eat insecti?" Asked the bewildered kid.

"Oh yes. And from what I'm told, those that do enjoy it as much as we do nectar. Unfortunately for us, some of the insect find we bees to be a delicacy. In fact, all of our pollenvoires are amongst their choicest, and so we took a heavy toll that day."

The young beelit tremored slightly at the thought of being eaten.

"It was a real ugly scene. The nastiest of all were the arachnids. They spun intricate webs and dazzled flying insecti into their traps. Once some fresh food was caught, the spiders would race to their prey. Then they would stick their fangs through the entrabee's exoskeleton and into their thorax, sucking out their innards," explained the father passionately, knowing he had his son entranced with his description of the last skirmish between insects and humans (2021).

"Yuck," said the bee, sickened at the thought.

"As if that weren't bad enough, imagine seeing an apocalyptic futile struggle between the ants and wasps as the air we breathe slowly became poisonous with their emanation from their bodies."

"Can I ask a dumb question," asked the bee, unsettled by its lack of knowledge.

"You're only dumb if you don't ask, Herman," professed the father.

"What is apokolytic and emanation?" He asked ashamedly.

"Oh, well, apocalyptic means a final, winner take all, struggle, and emanations are odors and poisons somewhat similar to our venom we use when threatened," he explained slowly.

"Oh," said the bee weakly.

"Anyway, we nearly all died, except for the borrowing insecti and the predators. Of course, once all of the prey were eaten, even the predatory creatures faced starvation," he narrated.

"Then what happened?"

"In an act so despicable as to be only mentioned in hushed voices, and never, ever, ever, around arachni, they turned to cannibalism," said the father quietly.

"Cannibalism?"

"They ate each other, Herman," he said.

"No way," said the youngster disbelieving.

"Yes, its true. It was either that or they all died. So you see Herman, this is why we are they way we are today. Its because the fleshy bipeds amended our natural selection by

creating a false environment thereby creating the flavors of all insecti left in Insectland. Only those whose disposition was towards cannibalism, predatory practices, or had protective venom like us, survived and was able to raise the next generation," he further explained the facts of life.

"Are you trying to say that before the fleshy bipeds captured you all and messed you up, insecti didn't prey on insecti, or eat each other?" Asked a non-believing Herman.

"Well sort of. Sure, there was some of that going on before the last war, or there would have been none of us who had that adaptation to survive. But for the most part, insecti have an unscented agreement of sorts going back billions of generations that kept the peace. And it is that idea of a return to peace that I am scenting to you about."

"Oh," was all Herman could think of. "Are you trying to bring back the peace?"

"Yes, I am, and I have help," said the older bee. "Now don't be afraid, but I'd like to introduce you to some fellow kingdom members. I know your first reaction will be to flee in survival instinct, but you must sit, listen, and learn," he ordered in a firm way his son.

Herman tensed the muscles of his legs and prepared his wings for flight, but fought hard to remain attached to the blades of grass he stood on.

From behind a clump of grass, strode together an arachnid, a wasp, and an ant (a remarkable feat given their natural propensity to eradicate each other).

"Herman, please say hello to Merri the arachnid, Green the wasp, and Colonel the ant," introduced the father, pointing to each one as they bowed respectively.

"Pl..pl..pleased to meet you," struggled the terrified Herman.

"Is that one of your sons, Martin?" Asked the spider.

"Yes Merri, and the rest of you, this is Herman, one of my latest and most intelligent of broods," he beamed proudly.

"It is fortunate for him he is so scrawny," teased Merri, as he bit his front mandibles together menacingly, yet with no real intent.

It was too much for the young Herman, whose leg muscles twitched and sent him leaping into the air, instinct taken hold.

"You biped Merri, what'd you do that for?" Scented strongly Martin.

"Oh come on Marty, he's just a kid. He's not ready for this yet. Besides, did you see how high he jumped," countered the spider as the others laughed.

"Well, I guess not. I'm telling you though, we need to get this younger generation on our side. Time has gone by too long since the old days, and there aren't many of us left whom remember the way things were," professed the adult bee.

"Yeah, well we got Merri on our side anyway," said Green. "If we can get a young spider to forgo eating live brethren, then there's hope for the next generation after all."

"Getting Merri to switch to the synbods wasn't hard with the biped named Louie's help. But nature is different now. The climate is completely benign, the air is stale, there are

no fleshy bodies to leave droppings for flies to consume, no dead carcasses to feed upon, and no rotting vegetation," said Colonel, concerned.

"Do you think the bipeds are to blame?" Asked Martin.

"Who else? Don't they constantly destroy your nests Green, your dwellings Colonel, and your habitats Martin? And like they have the gall to call us to their fleshy bodies with their attractive scents, bright colors, and mini suns, only to murder us upon our naturally driven investigation?" Stated Merri.

Stern scents of agreement met his call.

"I tell you, we need to rise again against the bipeds like you did last time Martin," said Colonel.

"And we need to do it soon, before there's no one left who remember the old ways," agreed Green.

"So it is time," announced Colonel. "We must start now. And we must have a leader."

"Yes, we must have a leader," agreed Merri.

"Yes, we must have a leader," agreed Green. The three newcomers stared directly at the elder bee, hopeful in their choice.

Sensing the implication, Martin tried to deflect it. "You can't mean me?" He asked.

"You're the only one left who survives the last battle. You're our only hope," countered Merri.

"But how? I don't know a thing about how to run a battle. I just followed orders during the last one," protested Martin.

"We'll take care of the battle plans," stated Colonel.

"All we need is for someone to bring us together, to rally for the cause, to be the symbol of the rebirth of Insectland," sold Merri.

"And you're the perfect choice," reaffirmed Green. "You're great with the younger generations."

"It is they who will suffer the greatest burden during the coming war," protested Martin.

"It is they who will share in the riches afterward," said Green.

"Do it not for yourself, but for the future," Merri closed the sales pitch.

"If you insist, I'll do it - on one condition," counteroffered Martin.

"Anything," the three scented in unison.

"Should we succeed in our aims, that there will be no more wars against each other. We must bring back the peace that we once enjoyed. No more insecti killing insecti. Just peace," he asked much of them and their following generations.

After a little thought, they agreed to hold to Martin's ideals. "Agreed!" They swore.

"Thank you. Now then, shall we begin to plan?" Asked Martin.

Thoughtfully and in great deliberation, the four of them drafted a rough formula for their gambit.

Louie LaSalle was passionately observing the above goings on. After the grouping of insects broke up, he picked up his favorite study and placed him on the specimen dish. The arachnid, by now use to what was to come, lay limply, awaiting the connection of the neural net. With the skill of a surgeon, Louie gingerly attached the super conducting magnetic inference device, or squid, to the command area of the arachnid's head. Satisfied all was properly connected, he ran a few cursory tests of the system and software.

"Merri," he began, "How are you?" Asked the father of yps-c.

"Louie, I am well. How are you," asked Merri in what he understood to be the custom.

"I am fine," answered Louie. "Tell me, what were you doing with such a remarkable assemblage of fellow kind?" He asked curious.

"We were discussing the future of Insectland," said the spider.

"And what does that future hold?" Asked the Nobel prize winner.

"Our gaining a land free from dominance by you fleshy evil bipeds," sneered Merri.

Louie was taken aback by the sudden change in demeanor of his favorite and most understood experiment. The spider below him was the first successful contact his intra phylum sub auditive processors was able to discern the primitive brain wave patterns presented by Merri. They had many discussions. This was the first hint that the insect looked at him as being evil.

"Why do you say we are evil?" He asked unknowingly.

"You have changed nature. Forced a sterile environment upon us. Caged us within hydrocarbon based polymers. Experimented upon us. We desire return to ways of old," stated the spider.

"By ways of old, do you mean a state of war against us?" He asked.

"Yes," was the simple reply.

Louie stared across his laboratory for a few minutes. His mind traveled back to when he was a kid. When he was 11, in 2021, he remembered seeing newstape reports of an "Invasion of the Insects". Killer insects, the result of genetic experiments gone awry, were accidentally released into the environment, where they reproduced and overtook the indigenous population. Soon, these mutant arthropods began attacking all mammalian life - cats, dogs, and people. What first started out west spread throughout the country and into what was then Canada (before their ultimate incorporation into the U.S.A. leading to the Greater U.S.). Millions of people were driven from their homes. Aerial spraying of pesticides was conducted, but the mutations caused some sort of immunity to the normally lethal rain. The native insects, however, succumbed to the

deadly rains, leaving only the supersects to cause panic and mayhem. Some of them infiltrated the National Weather Control Office and disabled the main computers, leaving mother nature in charge again for a short time. The National Parks were forced to close, and a rescue was even conducted of the bear and bison from the parks.

Eventually, the military was called in. But they were directed primarily to fight against an enemy of equal disposition, not one of such minuscule size. So they referred the job to the scientists at the Livermore National Laboratories, who had just enough knowledge of the insects to do the trick. And what a trick it was. Knowing how the insects communicated (though at the time not knowing the content of the message yet), they were able to manufacture a synthetic pheromone that to the ants indicated the scent of an enemy ant. This caused the ants to mercilessly attack anything that had this scent on them. This scent was quickly produced and was dispensed by airplane over the marauding insects. The result was complete collapse of the insect offensive and the near decimation of the entire phylum. Only quick action by the scientists was able to stop the demise of North America's entire insect population. Since then, a small group of scientists has been studying insects trying to learn their language. It remained a mystery until Doctor Louie LaSalle broke their code and conversed with a member of the insects - that member was Merri.

Now Merri wanted to be free. And not just itself, rather all of insect kind, wanted to be free. Louie had seen this coming, but had not expected such a development so soon. Still, he was prepared for such an eventuality.

"Merri, what if I offered you the chance to have new land, complete with all nature has to offer?" Said Louie tentatively.

"That is all we are asking. If you don't provide it to us we are prepared to take it by force," threatened the arachnid.

"There may be no need for that," offered Louie. "I think I can help you obtain your goal, but you must be prepared to help me."

"How can we help you?" Asked Merri.

"I envision a time, not now, but soon, when humankind will wage a war of unity against itself. This 'time of periculum' will unite not only humanity into one great foundation, but will also mark our peace with the varying species on this planet, including yours," dreamed Louie. "But I will need your help in creating a diversion and an excuse for utilizing the weapon I've chosen to defeat our enemies."

"How can we help?"

"In two ways. First, I propose to release you and all my subjects into the environment. Once released, you will be free to stake out whatever territory you want, provided it is located entirely within the confines of the States of California, Oregon, and Washington. You may use any methods you deem necessary to secure such area. After your occupation, we will acknowledge your claim to the area as a protectorate zone, leaving you in complete freedom to act within that area as you wish. Does that sound amicable?" He asked.

"What if we want more territory?"

"That is my second point. When the time comes, sometime in the not too distant future, I will be calling on you for the favor I expect for setting you free. It will require another struggle on your part, including an invasion of greater America. But I can guarantee, that when all is said and done, I will emerge victorious from my struggle, and I will initiate a long lasting peace between humanity and not just you, but all species present on Earth," he glowed with power.

"What do you say Merri? Are you in?"

"Sounds like a future I'd like to live in. When do we start?" Asked the bug enthusiastically.

"I'll start releasing you right now," he offered.

"Thank you, and you can count on me, friend," said the spider.

CHAPTER THREE

Sergeant John McPherson was riding in the M4A3 Sgt. York Fighting Vehicle into the usually bustling city of South Lyon. Reports had come in that New Detroit had shut off water and electrical service to the suburbs. His unit had been sent into the combat zone to confirm or deny this action. Sure enough, there was no electricity in his sector,

and there were numerous fires burning out of control, the firefighters watching the blazes and evacuating the areas, unable to douse the flames for lack of water. Every service station was ablaze. The center of town was one large conflagration as fires spread from building to building unchecked. Even the high school was on fire. Small arms fire could be heard from outside the vehicle. A small group of homeowners and businessmen were making a stand at Elmer's gun shop. It was hard for him to believe that this was America. What possessed these people to riot like this, he wondered, unknowing of their human condition.

Regardless of their reasoning (or lack of it, he figured), orders were orders. His 32nd Military Police (MP) Battalion from Howell was to subdue the invaders using the minimum level of force. His superiors reminded him that *the whole world was watching*, and there was to be no repeat of the crackdown on the Georgetown riots of '12 that left 185 dead. But being from Howell (the former headquarters of the Michigan Klu Klux Klan during the '80s), McPherson was predisposed to utilize maximum force whenever possible. And nearly all of his unit felt the same way.

Without electricity, the unit was out of direct radio contact with headquarters. Still, the mobile units were able to relay information to and from each other. So when Sgt. McPherson received his latest orders, he was dumb struck.

"Repeat that last order," he queried, unsure that he had truly heard what he thought he had.

"Roger Victor Yankee 32," came the voice on the other end of the high frequency transceiver. "Repeat. Your orders are to disarm all combatants and to create a buffer zone between the two aggressors. You are to use minimum force whenever possible. You are to stop the bloodshed immediately. Clear? Over," said the senior officer.

John did not like it one bit, but gave the indication he would carry out his orders.

"Affirmative," he said.

"HQ out."

Since he was near the gun shop, he decided to disarm the attackers first. He ordered the rest of his unit to cordon off the property. Seven tracked vehicles surrounded the small one story block structure, blocking the paths of fire. Small arms fire from the surrounding homes that were occupied by the rioters pinged against the side of the vehicles.

John motioned to his gunner, who had already loaded the charge into the turreted light howitzer. A loud bang, followed by the recoil of the gun indicated the CS round had been fired, on its way toward the nearest grouping of mobile homes from where the firing was coming from.

A large puff of smoke, signifying the dispensement of a pepper gas, billowed hazily in the moonlit sky. Four black youths from the inner city quickly fled the area of the gas attack, coughing and eyes watering the whole way away. That seemed easy enough, thought McPherson. Now would be the hard part. He ordered his unit to dismount and to disarm those held up inside the gun shop. With their guns drawn and safeties off, the

squad slowly proceeded to surround the blockhouse. Careful not to repeat Waco, their orders were to use minimum force, and, if under pressure, to retreat rather than force a fight. But those inside the building did not know that, assumed John as he carefully slinked up to the entranceway. He glanced left and right, making sure the rest of his squad was in position to back him up should anything happen. Normally, his training provided him to break in the door, firing with great violence at anything that moved, as he sought to secure the building. But this was not a war (at least not yet), so he had to be more cautious and polite so to speak. Still, the thought was in the forefront of his mind that those inside might not know who he was from the brothers that attacked. So McPherson decided on the direct approach.

He pounded on the door. "Open up, this is Sgt. McPherson of the 32nd Military Police," he announced.

"It's open," was the hushed reply.

They're making me make the first move, thought John. The last thing he wanted to do was to walk into a trap. Better show them who's boss, he thought. "Lay down your arms and walk single file out the door," he ordered, taking a step back from the door.

His request was met with sneers and swears. He awaited their exit, which did not come.

"I have been ordered by the Governor of the State of Michigan to disarm all combatants by any means necessary," he lied about the level of usage of force allowed.

"Fuck you," was the reply, along with the sound of safeties going off.

"We're on the same side. We just want to see an end to the violence like I'm sure you do," he changed tact.

There was no reply, only the sound of heavy gun cases being pulled across a wooden floor.

Carefully, John studied the tactical situation. He observed several listening devices placed along the gutters of the building. Also, there were three television cameras on the roof that were watching his movements. There were no windows, only small portals from which the men inside had been firing. As long as the cameras were active, there could be no tactical surprise, knew John.

With a wave of his hand, he motioned his squad back into their fighting vehicles. Once inside, he had his gunner target the cameras. With great precision, his gunner aimed the 30mm cannon at the cameras and fired. The high explosive (HE) shell tore apart the roof at the three places where the cameras were. With that accomplished, John planned the next phase of their assault. But he needed more information first. He called up HQ and had them download a schematic of the architectural drawing of the blockhouse, which was on file in public domain on the internet. Within minutes, his miscom (mission computer) displayed the construction blueprints to the building. Everything John wanted to know was present; the location and number of rooms, the thickness of the masonry walls, and the fortuitous lack of a basement. Using ADM (air data modems), he was able to share this information with the rest of his squad. Taking

out his light pen, he began to sketch out his plan of attack. The pen's movements, as well as his voice, were broadcast simultaneously to his squad. When he finished laying out his plan five minutes later, there were no questions. He looked at his watch, it was 2029. When it was 2030, he'd strike.

Every one of his unit's fighting vehicles had their howitzers trained on the blockhouse. At precisely 2030, each of them fired a smoke cartridge at the building. White puffs of aluminum powdered metallic smoke, designed to defeat infra red sensors, billowed upwards and completely enveloped the hold out, blocking their vision completely. John had his driver rev the engine of the 17 ton Sgt. York Light Combat Infantry Vehicle. Everyone harnessed themselves securely inside the vehicle, a procedure used for only unusual circumstances. John looked at his driver for signs that he was ready. With a nod of his head, John gave the go ahead to his driver.

The heavy vehicle lurched forward at a slow speed toward the weakest point in the rear masonry wall. Seconds later, they hit the wall with a loud crash, and broke through it, into the rear administrative room. As soon as they were inside, he had his gunner rotate the turret forward and load, then fire, a pepper gas cartridge.

Inside, the dozen or so people holed up knew something was up when the smoke was fired. They hunkered down behind their makeshift battlements, and awaited the expected kicking in of the door. So when instead a fighting vehicle smashed its way from the rear unexpectedly into their domain, they were stunned. Before they had a chance to recover, the smoke cartridge went off, wreaking panic and confusion in their ranks. As if that weren't enough, the front door was rammed in by another vehicle,

which also fired a pepper gas cartridge. Coughing helplessly, unable to breathe or see, they threw down their arms and straggled outside, to be apprehended by the waiting rest of the squad.

When the smoke cleared, John smiled to himself. "All right!" He yelled enthusiastically as he gave the high five to his driver and gunner. This was McPherson's first real combat mission, and he passed it with flying colors. As he backed his vehicle up, he was stunned to see a young man, no more than a teenager, whose skull and chest were crushed by his tracks. It was his first death. Command's not going to like this, he remorse to himself. He had already overstepped his bounds by destroying the blockhouse. But he had accomplished his mission - that of disarming them. While the rest of his squad kept a leery watch on the temporary captives, John and his second, Sgt. Zawenski gathered up the various arms and put them into their vehicles. Once all the weapons were confiscated, his men released the prisoners and returned to their craft.

It did not take long before word got out about the disarming of civilians. From CB, SSB, and Ham radio, the call to arms went out to defend the Constitution and the right to bear arms. All across Michigan, from Fowlerville to Wolverine to Orchard Lake and Dearborn, the self declared Michigan Militia "Wolverines" unlocked their gun cases and fetched their ammo boxes. They gathered their B.D.U.s, weapons of choice (scoped rifles), ammo filled webbed belts, literary pamphlets describing the Militia's mission statement, got into their pickup trucks, and headed to the various field headquarters of their loosely defined units.

For fifty years they have trained in the woods and on the farms on how to fight a guerrilla campaign against the government, should such a day ever arise. While some members were zealots and crazy (like Timothy McVeigh), most were dedicated to the Constitution and what it stands for. Most had seen increasing government interference in their lives over the years, and had had enough. After the Oklahoma City bombing in '95, the Militia fought with itself for several years over the future of the organization. Some wanted the movement to take a proactive role, similar to that course pursued by the National Rifle Association (N.R.A.). But the majority disdained the government and what it stood for, that of limiting the naturally occurring freedoms that they considered held by all. This position juxtaposed that which the government felt, and that is the government through the Constitution grants only those rights as set forth in law. This dichotomy of viewpoints of how and what freedoms exists led to an immediate clash between the government and the Militias nationwide.

The government infiltrated the various groups with undercover FBI and ATF agents in an attempt to keep abreast of any changes in their demeanor, and to sow internal dissent whenever possible. Because of their success, the militias had amounted to little more than a nuisance and fringe movement, causing no real trouble, though many bank robberies were suspected of being committed by the militia to bankroll their expensive weapons purchases. But that all changed today. Now there was a cause to rally around. The government had crossed the line in the woods, so to speak, with its imposition of a state of emergency. With the suspension of the 2nd and 4th Amendments, the militias had the sole purpose of their existence forced upon them.

And they will rise up to the occasion and take punitive actions against the government.
For today, there is war.

The hundred plus year old, two story wooden framed home, surrounded by tilled fields of winter wheat, a collapsed cow barn, a collapsing pole barn, and four concrete silos, looked peaceful enough from the outside. But inside the pole barn, lit by the morning sun coming in through the holes in the walls where the wood siding had rotted through, gathered the 51st Division of the Michigan Militia. Warmed by coffee and eating donuts, the camouflaged members were planning their days' activities. The 51st Division held some of the most outspoken proponents of using force against the government. Their leader, Mike Jones, was a 70 year old farmer. He was an old timer who lived in Fowlerville before it grew into the sprawling city that it now is. He had had several run-ins with the authorities over the years. Most recently, he had pulled a gun on the County Sheriff who had tried to enforce the city's new Non-Blight ordinance. The City Council, in its infinitesimally small wisdom, recently passed a no blight ordinance, that his new, wealthy, suburbanite neighbors, just in from the city, wanted enforced. Mike protested that as a long time resident (over 50 years), he was entitled to his rights to do with his property as he pleased. But he, along with his no-growth candidacy, was defeated by the city slickers that had replaced most of the farmers who at one time were the majority of Fowlerville's inhabitants. Now Mike had only thirty days to tear down the remnants of the barn and his collapsing pole barn, and remove his eight rusting vehicles he has abandoned on his property. And then there was the rezoning of his property from Agricultural to Commercial. All this caused a disdain for the government's way of doing what it wants, the people be damned, and brought his feelings to a boil. So it

was with great emotion and disgust with the way things are, that he, the leader of the 51st Militia, opened the meeting on Tuesday, October 31, 2041.

"Lets get things rollin'," he said as he puffed on a swisher sweet filterless cigar.

The gathered members, forty strong, took their seats and gazed through the smoke at the leader before them. Most members were in two age groups - either in their forties and fifties, or in their teens. All of them looked with praise upon their leader, who was the last of the original founding members of the Militia. He had taught each of them how to fight as a group. He had taught each of them how to use the natural cover the woods provided to hide from and then to harass the enemy. He had taught all of them how to make explosives, from simple molotov cocktails to deadly fuel oil/fertilizer block busters. All of them utilized Gips and GIS map databases that held potential targets (Federal and State offices). Many were trained in booby-trapping and other demolitions skills. They all owned and operated rifles. And it helped if they owned pickup trucks (with which to carry all the ammo and various weapons in). Each felt ready for whatever their leader desired of them.

"As I already discussed informally with you this morning, the governor has suspended the 2nd and 4th Amendments to the Constitution," began Mike Jones. "The time we have all feared has arrived. We've known its been coming since they forced the Brady bill upon us, and its finally here. Last night, our militia friends in South Lyon were mercilessly mauled by the National Guard troops. Those boot-legged volunteers used some powerful gas on our comrades, forcing them to leave the gun store which they were defending from the nigger invaders. One of the brave patriots was crushed to

death by a tracked vehicle which battered through the concrete walls of Elmer's store. After penetrating and securing the building, the guard troops took every single weapon from the store, including all of the ammo. After they were finished, they threw at our men in arms, who were still suffering from the effects of the gas, a letter from the governor, declaring that all firearms are to be turned in to be confiscated, immediately," he said to boos.

"Thus, as of today, we are at war with the state until such time as they accede to our demands that the Constitution be honored, or until they pry our weapons from our cold, dead, bodies."

Shouts of agreement met his call to arms.

"To paraphrase a phrase uttered by that great leader Sir Winston Churchill nearly a century ago, '*History has recorded who threw the first punch...History will know who threw the last punch*'!" He exclaimed vigorously.

Dog howls and deep grunts echoed throughout the dilapidated pole barn.

"The consequences of last night's shot heard 'round the world will reverberate throughout the state of Michigan. We are to begin today our two pronged assault, as planned for nearly a half century ago," he introduced his opening briefing on the coming attack.

"First, we are to rearm our brothers who had their weapons taken from them last night. Second, we are to equip ourselves with as many molotov cocktails as each can carry

and meet us at the intersection of I-96 and US-23 after dark. The strategic importance of this I should not have to tell you. From this location, we can bombard any unit traveling along those freeways. Our goal is to disable or destroy as many enemy vehicles as possible, blocking the freeways and cutting off their reinforcement. The guard troops are relatively weak, and have no aerial support, so I don't expect much problem. Once they leave their vehicles, we can easily pick them off from the cover of the woods nearby. When we no longer have any cocktails left, we sneak away in the night to fight another day. We will repeat this series of hit and runs every night, with a different target each night so as not to be too predictable. Any questions?" He asked.

There were none.

"Good. Then I'll see you at 8 o' dark at the rendezvous point," he concluded.

"Sir, I have a question," asked one of the teens.

"Certainly, what is it?" He queried.

"You mentioned a two pronged assault. I only heard one. What's the 2nd?" he asked.

"Leave that to me," he scowled with a sinister smirk.

Timid laughter and a few "best you not know, kid" comments were slapped about.

As the group began to break up into several groups, two of the elders stayed behind. They were Roger Johnson and Brian Tyler, the unit's explosives experts. Roger was from Williamston and Brian was from Howell. Like Mike Jones, they were also farmers,

and had suffered greatly when the Republicans deleted the farm subsidies during the '10s. Together, the three of them were the holy triad of sorts. Any one of them could lead the organization, and at times when Mike was sick, they would do just that. Both of them were on the internet, and were very effective at getting the word out to the world about the militia's goal of protection of the Constitution. Unlike Mike, they were well respected in their home towns. They had played the political game more so than Mike, issuing support for local candidates that agreed with their ideals. Both had befriended their County Sheriffs, whom they helped to elect. And both knew that law enforcement was smartly staying out of this whole affair. This was strictly between the state and the people, or so they thought.

For years they had planned for this eventuality. Targets had been picked, practice explosives refined and detonated, and reconnaissance trips conducted to pick the weakest structural areas. It was agreed by all that they had to strike. All they had to do was pick a target.

"I say we strike the HQ in Howell," began Roger. "After all, that's where the unit that killed Jimmy is housed."

"I don't think its much of a target anymore," countered Brian. "There's no electricity, all of the unit is on location in the field someplace, so all we'd be doing is blowing up an empty building. What's the message in that?"

"Why don't we blow up the bridge on I-96 at the Oakland County Line?" Offered Roger.

"That'll keep the niggers out, and force the guard to operate on the back roads, where we can ambush them better."

"I like that one," agreed Mike.

"So do I," replied Brian.

"But, that's not what I had in mind for tonight, although I think we'll do that tomorrow," decided Mike.

"You have something already in mind, don't you," noticed Brian.

"Yep," confirmed Mike.

"Well...." Queried Roger.

"I think tonight we should strike at the source of this war. By that I mean the man himself responsible for causing this civil war," offered Mike.

"The President?" Asked Brian.

"No, not the President. He's been smart enough to keep the federal troops out of it so far. No, I'm talking about the governor." He announced.

"Wilson?" Asked Roger.

"Yep," said Mike as he threw down the remains of his now completely smoked cigar.

"The truck..." asked Brian.

"Yep," was all Mike said.

"Who's going to ignite it?" Asked Brian.

"They've already got a warrant for my arrest after my pulling a gun on the Sheriff two days ago."

"But you'll be killed," Roger said the obvious.

"I've lived my life, shit, I'm 70 years old. No, I'm not going back, if that's what you plan on telling me, Roger. Some things are worth dying for. Remember, they can't stop one man, but they can an army. I'm going to be that one man. And some day, who knows, when this is all said and done, maybe you'll sing songs about me, my heroism and sacrifice. I've already loaded the panel van, gassed it up, and am ready to go. I just wanted to let you know who's responsible for OUR opening shot in the war," he said, his eyes glimmering in the fantasy that he'd be held a hero.

"When?" Asked Roger.

"Soon," was all Mike would say.

The three stood in silence for a few minutes, each reflecting on the future. None of them wanted this war. It was the governor that forced it upon us, each thought. Yes, the two of them were satisfied with the target chosen by their leader. Roger patted Mike on the back, and turned and left for his pickup.

"May you succeed," wished Brian as he gripped his leader's hand firmly. It would be the last time he did so, he noted. He turned and left to his trans, and headed home, leaving Mike alone in the pole barn, his breath still visible in the cold, unheated building.

"Good bye old barn," he whispered softly. "I told you I'd never let them tear you down as long as I lived," he said, gripping tenderly one of the main posts for a few moments.

As he walked out the open door, he observed everything around him, for what he knew would be one last time as he strode to the van, opened the door, entered it, and started it.

CHAPTER FOUR

The radar warning receiver buzz demanded my attention. I quickly scanned the situational display and observed a Lea **Firedart** bandit a few clicks behind and below my craft. I activated a decoy, and an air filled simulation of my vehicle expanded between myself and the oncoming missile.

"Missile surfing," announced with a slight shrill indicative of the danger level the defcom (defensive computer) that the enemy missile was attempting to drive past my decoy.

"Damn," I expelled as I slammed my fist against my leg. I jinked my Transatmospheric vehicle (TAV) to maintain the decoy between myself and the oncoming missile. The Lea ExoSat Mark X hypervelocity missile (HVM) continued to track true.

"Activate terminal defenses," I huffed and ordered the defcom as I continued evasive maneuvers.

An expensive state of the art towed active decoy was deployed, and it immediately began emitting electromagnetic energy in visible, ultraviolet, infrared, microwave, radio, and radar frequencies that corresponded to my Tav.

The missile's ECCM logarithms ignored the bright radiant energy from the decoy and continued to rocket along its projected path towards my jinking craft.

The enemy missile exploded close in.

Alarms started going off. The stick was dead. The damcom (damage computer) was sounding off numerous systems that were damaged.

"...Fuel cells 1 and 2 leaking, OMS-3 and 4 inoperative, APU 1 not responding ... abort...abort..."

Angrily, I switched the damcom's audio to off. Fucking French would make a missile better than any of their troops have fought in history, I swore. Abort the mission my ass,

I continued to curse. I utilized the RCS (Reaction Control System) to slowly rotate my craft to face the approaching **Firedart**. He was coming at me from my V-Bar, which is exactly as I desired. I powered all systems to sustenance levels only, with the exception of my atcom (attack computer) and one HVM. As seconds went by without the opponent firing a shot, I could scarcely believe the poor tactics of the enemy. He continued to approach me, maneuvering at a high angle of attack. My threat receivers were lit up like Christmas lights. He could have me at any time. Still, the **Firedart** came closer. One thousand meters, nine hundred, eight hundred. I could see the fresh unpainted nose, just off the assembly line. My thinking was that the pilot was equally as fresh. I wondered if I was to be his first kill, and he was curious to see the face of the enemy. Six hundred yards.

The tone indicated my atcom had positively acquired the target and was prepared to fire.

"Fire!" I thought, and a HVM was sent on its way to the enemy.

I watched the missile close in on the **Firedart**.

The enemy pilot flinched a little at the sight of the HVM headed his way. Recovering quickly, he fired his forward electron beam at my craft.

His reactive jerk on the controls led his beam to miss me by centimeters. My missile hit true on, creating an explosion like the forth of July. Instinctively, I took the stick and pulled to get away from the blast and the deadly shrapnel. But the OMS were not responding. I tried to turn from the blast, but the nitrogen powered RCS was not fast

enough. I could see displayed on the metallic canopy hundreds of pieces of shrapnel headed my way, soon to make mincemeat out of my protective cocoon. "Fucking dammit!" I swore, pressing every thruster I could find. The spacecraft began to rotate rapidly around its center of gravity in a pitching motion as two of the thrusters were stuck in the open position. As the rotation increased, the centrifugal force built up. It became harder to breathe. My vision dimmed and began to go tunnel. A slight yawing was introduced into the vector equation, completely throwing off my equilibrium. The hard pressure body suit topped out at 14 Gs. As my perception of reality darkened to nearly black, my oxygen rich pressurized environment was engulfed in warmth, flames, and yes, urine and puke.

The spinning stopped, my helmet and face mask were removed, and a very bright light shone directly into my eyes, blinding them with a white haze.

"Are you all right?" Asked a blurry medtech as she gave me a hypo spray.

The gray matter took awhile to construct an appropriate model of the world I was emerging into. "I, I, I don't know," was all I could muster.

"Can you stand?" She asked, giving me a helping hand.

"I guess so," I said. I attempted to rise, my muscles expelled of energy and my body full of sweat from fighting G forces.

I managed to stand for a few seconds. "What happened?" I asked.

"You got the bad guy," she said.

"Good," I smiled, and blacked out, collapsing into the waiting medtech's arms.

I came to several minutes later. This time I was cognizant of what was going on.

"Not a bad sim, Major," a Second Lieutenant congratulated me.

"Thank you...your name again?" I asked having forgotten.

"Second Lieutenant Yankovic, Sir.

"Yankovic. Gotcha," I repeated his name to reinforce its memory.

"That sim usually gets the best of us, Sir," he conceded. "What I don't understand is why you didn't punch out after you'd been hit?"

"Is that what you'd have done?" I asked.

"Everyone does once they realize everything's off-line," announced the officer who was in charge of the simulation parameters for today.

"But I just disproved that, didn't I?" I countered. "I did, after all, splash one bandit."

"Yes, but the lesson here is supposed to be that the pilot's life is more important than suicidal heroics like you just performed," he contended.

"So you're saying I should just give up, punch out, and orbit the Earth forever?" I said cynically.

"Well, a rescue shuttle would arrive eventually," he confessed.

"Maybe in the sim, but in reality I've found that they're just as much a target as a Tav, they're slower and easier to kill, so they often never arrive," I remarked.

"Look, I'm not here to question your beliefs or experience - you're obviously a very experienced Star Pilot, but we want you in one piece so you can fight again," stated Yankovic.

"Thank you for your flippant compliment," I sneered. "I just don't like to lose. And like they say, *it ain't over 'til its over*," I professed.

"Well, that being the case, I guess you're ready for today's operation," he said.

"Operation?" I asked.

"Yes Sir. General Mely will be briefing the squadron in a manner of minutes."

"Where?"

"Conference Room Green," he said.

"Thank you. I guess I'd better get going," I said as I gathered my flight gear.

"See you there," he said.

Several minutes later, I was situated in the conference room, awaiting the afternoon's briefing. I casually looked around the spartan room, observing each pilot's concerned face. There were rumors that the situation in the Caribbean was escalating faster than

the Secretary of Defense had anticipated. With the sinking yesterday of the LEA nuclear powered carrier *Bastille*, a massive fleet of surface ships was making way for South America from their ports in Britain, France, and Russia. Within two days they will arrive within striking distance of our bases in Mexico and Honduras. There was nervous talk on compuvision that the navy felt it's own nuclear powered carriers were vulnerable to the oncoming fleet. The navy brass was demanding some kind of action be taken prior to the enemy's arrival, or else they would have to withdrawal the expensive and invaluable carriers to US territorial waters, which would lead the carrier's airplanes out of range of their targets. There was talk of mining the approaches to the Caribbean, but that was only rumors. The fact that we were called in to a briefing when normally we would just be practicing in the sims indicated to us that some kind of decision had been made to strike. But what would the targets be?

General Mely entered the room from the main entranceway, and strode stiffly to the podium. The lights dimmed and the rear projection screen came to life with the display of the National Imagery and Mapping Agency (NIMA) symbol displayed. General Mely cleared his throat with a slight cough, and began his briefing.

"Ladies and Gentleman," he began, "at 1225 Zulu, my office received orders from the J.C.S. to initiate mission Celestial Sweep."

As he mentioned the name of the mission, a holographic display of the Earth, surrounded by blue and red dots in orbit, with the words Celestial Sweep in big gold letters, appeared to the General's side.

"Celestial Sweep has been designed to eliminate the enemy's eyes and ears over the area of hostilities. We have been instructed to take out ONLY those satellites that are in direct viewing of the battlefield. While we are operating in space to take out those assets, a coordinated ground strike will take place attacking the ground stations and command and control areas in theater. This is but the first step in clearing the skies and the heavens of the enemy. By eliminating those assets, J.C.S. hopes the carriers will be safe from the approaching enemy fleet. Be alert for enemy orbital activity, as the Lea is probably aware of our plans."

The display zoomed to the area directly over the Southern Caribbean. Two geosynchronous communications satellites were visible, as well as one radar imaging satellite, two photoreconnaissance satellites, and three Lea versions of Gips.

"These are our targets," he said as the red colored dots flashed on and off. "J.C.S. believes they are equipped as are ours, with a proximity fuse, to prevent capture of such assets. Therefore, after making visual identification of the target, use your HVMS to eliminate them. Stay alert for orbital debris, its liable to get pretty messy up here after today."

"The assignments are: Alpha Group, Geosynchronous One. Bravo Group, Geosynchronous Two. Both of you will have to use extended range HVMS to hit your targets," General Mely clarified.

"Charlie Group, Cosmos 2934-A. Delta Group, Bete Noir radarsat. Echo Group, Cosmos 3002-C. Fox Trot Group, Glosnass 6, Golf Group Glosnass 8, and Hotel

Group Glosnass 21. We want this to be a coordinated strike, such that all the targets are demolished simultaneously. Your HC (hyper cube) data has been interfaced with your miscoms (mission computers) to allow you to do this. Some of you will be out there waiting near your targets for four hours until H Hour. You may engage any enemy that you see, but do not fire until after your primary mission has been complete," warned the general. "I'm sure after these targets are destroyed you'll have more company than you'll want, so be alert and utilize your defcoms well. If the odds aren't in your favor, bug out and RTL (return to launch site). We don't need any dead heroes out there today," he said as he looked me squarely in the eye.

"If there are no questions, good hunting and good luck," he said strongly.

He moved to the exit and waited. We arose from our chairs and headed for our Tavs, the general giving each of us a firm handshake on the way out. The feeling of history weighed heavily on us as we entered our pressurized flight suits. For the first time in nearly ninety years of space flight, the unsaid treaty prohibiting combat in space was to be broken. Sure, space assets have fought in wars before, but that was only as a means of providing information resources, not having actual combat. In wars past, it was the ground targets of the enemy that were attacked, it was far too expensive to operate in space. That was before the Tav. The Tav, being able to operate in and out of the atmosphere, brought space combat all that closer. Both sides trained for it once Tavs were produced, and it was only a matter of time before they were used. Now it is time. As I made my way to the waiting **Eagle** Tav (POL No. 081), I pondered what this action might mean for the future of manned space flight. After today, a small sphere of

debris will orbit the Earth for thousands of years, creating a hazard to any spacecraft that flies through the cloud. As no satellites or spacecraft are currently armored, that whole region of space will become uninhabitable to man and machine alike. I wished there was a better way of destroying the target other than to blow it into a thousand bits of deadly shrapnel. Of course, J.C.S. had thought that too, I assumed, so the fact that we're doing so must mean there is no other way. Still, the concept of making certain areas of space off limits to future countless generations nagged at my conscious as I climbed into my vehicle. I hoped the brass at J.C.S. knew what they were doing, I thought. If only there was another way, I remorse.

Fifteen minutes later I was hurtled out the launch bay, toward my intended target - the Radarsat Bete Noir. I was fortunate in that my flight time would be nearly three hours, as I would have to raise my orbit several hundred kilometers to slow down and catch the satellite. This meant I would not have to wait around in the vicinity of the target as some others will, thus potentially giving away their intentions. Even as I input the three dimensional coordinates of my prey, there was no guarantee that it would be there when I arrived. Bete Noir, like most modern satellites, have the ability to maneuver out of potential harm's way. And ever since the '90s when the Space Shuttle proved by capturing the Intelsat satellite that no target is safe from being captured, most national assessment means were protected with proximity fuses and self adjusting active countermeasures to be used when attacked. Or, an enemy Lea **Firedart** could be anywhere, unseen, lurking in the twilight of another dawn over Earth below. I was prepared for any such eventuality. I only hoped that the Lea pilots were as "green" as

those in the sims. I was good in the simulator, but was untested in actual combat. Soon, I would find out just how good (hopefully) I am.

CHAPTER FIVE

The old man driving rapidly towards the state capitol flipped open his cell phone and placed a call to the nearest F.B.I. office, located in Ann Arbor.

"Good Morning, F.B.I.," said the answering voice.

"Yeah, is Al in?" asked the man from inside his transport.

"One moment, I'll check," voiced the woman at the F.B.I. local office.

A few moments went by before the query was answered.

"Al here," said the deep booms of his voice.

"Al, its Roger, call sign exposure," gave the man in the transport to his boss.

"Its good to hear from you Roger," said the man, changing his demeanor noticeably to a more friendly one upon hearing from his agent. "What's up?" he asked.

"Trinity has begun," he spoke in coded messages.

"What? When?" he bellowed, horrified and caught off guard.

"I'd say our pigeon will be there within a half hour. Oh, and by the way, the targets the Governor this time," clarified Roger.

"The Governor?" he sat mystified for a moment. "Because of his declaring martial law?" he asked.

"Partly, but mostly it has to do with the search and seizure looking for guns that started last night."

"Uh huh," was all he replied.

"What do you want me to do about it?"

"Nothing." was the terse reply.

"You can't be serious. Hundreds of people may die. The governor-" he was cut off.

"Will die too," confessed Al, whose name was really only a pseudonym itself.

"We can't let that happen," protested Roger bitterly.

"We must let them strike first," countered the boss.

"Where's the precedent for that? Pearl Harbor? The World Trade Bombings? The Sears Tower bombing? Or the three truck bombs that obliterated the national headquarters of the F.B.I. in Washington? For the first time we *know* the intended target before the strike. We can at least evacuate some of the key personnel first," argued Roger.

"On the contrary, we must have a repeat of the F.B.I. blast that killed nearly 1,000 people and completely demolished the federal building."

"Why?" asked Roger.

"We went over this time and time again, or have you forgotten your role in all of this."

"No, I haven't forgotten. You can't let those people die. There's something to be said for a preemptive strike."

"My decision comes from the top. They want that bellicose old man to succeed. It will help bring the country together in unity against these crazy militia men, and will help to propel further enforcement of the no guns issue the riot brought out into the open in the first place," explained Al.

"That's fucking bullshit and you know it," decried Roger. "I'm going to go straight to the press if you don't do something. In fact, if you're not going to take Mike Jones out, I will!" he yelled as he slammed down the phone and accelerated past legal speed, his destination - the state capitol.

Meanwhile, Al slammed down the phone and cursed loudly to himself. He had never faced a situation like this, and was unsure of how to react. Scrolling through the numbers of his acom, he found the number for the top man at the F.B.I. in Washington, the Director himself. He had his acom dispatch a priority one call to his preeminent supervisor. As the minutes went by, he started the chrono function on his wrist watch to

give him an accurate indication of the passage of time. There was so little time. Finally, his pocom announced that the Director was on the phone.

"Director Davidson here, what is it?" he said unimpressed with the computer's sense of urgency.

"Sir, its Bob Scherer, Director of the Ann Arbor District Office of the F.B.I," he announced his title, though his pocom had informed him of his title prior to the Director accepting the call.

"You called me," invited Davidson.

"Yes Sir, I did. I have two problems, one of which I'm not sure of what to do," he confessed.

"Yes, go on," he commanded.

"To begin with, Project Enforcer was begun at the turn of the millennium, to keep tabs on the various militia groups in and associated with Michigan. One of our agents, code named Roger, has been a member of the Fowlerville unit since it's inception. He usually reports in after each monthly meeting, but today was unusual and unexpected so soon after the declaration of martial law. Roger called to inform me that their leader has planned a strike at the capitol within," he checked his chrono before continuing, "twenty minutes."

"You thanked him for this information," asked Al's superior.

"Yes," he lied, almost imperceptibly grimacing.

"Did you tell him of our orders?" he asked.

"Yes, and that's the problem. I think we've got a rogue agent on our hands now. Not only do I have to deal with the aftermath of the explosion, but now I've got to figure out what Roger might do and stop him."

"Stop him? Hell, shoot the fucker! I want him dead before he contacts a single soul. I'll give you whatever resources you need," he professed.

"Good. I'm going to need the latest real-time feed from Gips. If we can locate him, maybe we can subdue him before word gets out," planned Al (Bob).

"You've got it, I'm tapping into the system, now. Good luck and may you shoot straight." said the Director.

"Thank you, Sir." he said as he immediately called the Michigan State Police. Upon an answer of his call, Al began his call to arms. "This is Director Scherer of the F.B.I."

"How may we help you," asked the voice on the other end of the line.

"I've got an escaped felon driving his transport on the way to the capitol. The sole occupant of his trans is wanted dead -or alive. Use whatever force you can bring to bear. I want this man stopped. He's not only a cop killer, but he killed one of our agents as well," lied Bob. "I'm feeding a live Gips picto to you for his locality. We've got him pegged doing 170 km/ph on I-96 Westbound approaching I-127. He may be trying to

assassinate the Governor. He is extremely dangerous and must be stopped," begged Al (Bob).

"We've got a plains clothed undercover State Police officer in the vicinity. I'll give him the orders now," said the State Police Sergeant on the other end of the line.

"Thank you. I'll be watching your progress from Gips. If there's ever been one man to get, this is him," said Bob.

"We'll get him, no one outruns us," said the policeman, obviously believing the stuff the recruiters told him.

"Oh shit!" yelled Bob as he slammed down the phone with the realization that Roger had called on a cellular and might be trying to call for help. With an adrenaline induced shake, he paged through the numbers of his acom to locate the cellular phone company. Finding it, he quickly called them.

"ATT&T, how may I help you?" asked the feminine voice on the other end.

"Hi, this is Director Bob Scherer of the F.B.I. I have a cell phone number that I need to have disconnected immediately," he said.

Being familiar with F.B.I. requests like this in the past, the woman gave no trouble to Bob at all. Within a scant thirty seconds after Bob had given her the number she disconnected the actively used line at the switching station. Now only those with a scanner could pick up Roger's frantic calls.

With a sense of satisfaction, and the knowledge by looking at Gips that the police car was within sight of the target, Bob stopped shaking and waited for the expectant explosion.

"Hello...Hello..Fuck!" Roger slammed down the phone as he realized he was disconnected. He picked up the phone again, only to find that it was completely unresponsive to his commands. Bastards must have shut it off, he thought. He was flying at nearly double the speed limit, at the extreme edge of his engine's horsepower. His temperature and oil lights were flashing to Roger's annoyance. But he cared little of it. He had to make it before Mike did, he believed. He was still in a sense of shock over the exchange he had with his superior - Al. When he signed up for undercover duty in the Michigan Militia, he was sure that it was so the F.B.I. could monitor and pre-empt any plans by them to do anything revolutionary. But upon hearing his master's voice saying in effect to ignore what was to happen, shook every fiber in his being. He could not be a party to such a cover-up as they attempted.

As he rounded the junction of I-127 and I-96, Roger noticed Mike's panel van, heavily laden and moving slowly in the right lane, about 1/2 a mile ahead. Mike patted himself down, but was without any weapons. What could he do? Well, he thought, I can always run into the rear of the vehicle, that should take it out. And with all the airbags inside the transport, he was unlikely to be injured, even with the 70km/hr speed differential. All he had to do was get past the slower moving traffic in front of him. But try as he might, there was a stubborn purple Dodge transport license number 496 GFD

above the barcode, blocking his path. Suddenly and unexpectedly, the craft before him jammed on the brakes, to the sound of collision alarms going off inside his cockpit. The automatic avoidance system steered to the left, out in the gravel shoulder, but the car before him jinked to block his path. The transport compensated and moved further left, now into the median, and coming to a hard, bouncing, bumpy, stop. The other car rolled to a stop, and the man inside jumped out and ran to Roger's now crippled transport. Roger opened the canopy, and with a furious look on his face, yelled out loud. "You killed them! You fucker, I tried to save them!" It was all he would utter, as the man (an undercover pig-State Police Officer) from the purple transport raised his gun and shot Roger between the eyes, to slump slowly to the ground. Just another senseless car jacking, later reported the officer. Later, he would receive a silent commendation.

Mike Jones slowly drove his ancient rusty, barely road worthy, panel truck downtown Lansing. When he arrived on Capitol Avenue south of Ottawa Street, he turned on his flashers and parked it next to City Hall. He climbed out of his vehicle and headed for the rear door. He opened it enough for him to climb inside, and then he shut the door. He turned on the interior lights and looked at the two dozen 55-gallon steel drums loaded with fuel oil and fertilizer. He grabbed the ignitor wire, and carefully selected the longest ones which he would light first. He had five minutes from the moment of ignition of the first wire to light the remaining twenty-four wires. He climbed rather ungainly over the closest barrels and proceeded to hop from drum to drum to reach those in the rear.

Upon reaching the first rear row of barrels, he took out a wire and placed it into the small bung opening on top of each barrel. He did this for each of the six rows of barrels that he had in there (any more and the vehicle would be dragging on the street as it drove). Once he was finished inserting the fuses, he again crawled to the front of the van, at the furthest most barrels from the rear and lit the fuses, one by one by one. It took him a little over one minute to complete his task, all the while swearing to himself about all of the laws that took away everyone's rights. He exited the rear door, and looked at his watch - three minutes to ignition and explosion. Mike knew there was nowhere he could walk to that quickly and survive the blast. So he reached into his pocket and grabbed a cigar. He lit it, and walked next to the van, as if he were waiting for someone. He continued to smoke his cigar, and as he did so, he felt more relaxed than ever before. He was half finished with his cigar when the last fifteen seconds ticked toward zero. He drew heavily upon the cigar, and then cursed silently to himself. Fuck you, mother fuckers! Fuck you all! he thought as the last seconds ticked off. A sinister smile swept across his face at five seconds. At two seconds he closed his eyes and held his breath.

BOOOOOM!!!

CHAPTER SIX

The Presidential briefing was attended by most of his staff. Al Severly was giving the briefing to the President concerning Operation Celestial Sweep.

"... will comb the heavens of Lea's prying eyes. Without photoreconnaissance assets available to them, the approaching enemy fleet will be blind and hence sitting ducks for our aircraft," he continued. "Once this mission is accomplished, we can move our carriers back into territorial waters and bring our ground attack aircraft to bear directly upon the battlefield."

"What is their likely response to be?" asked the President Ernst Gilbert.

"Ernst, it is intelligence's opinion that they will more than likely provide similar counterfire against our photoreconnaissance assets over the Caribbean," stated AI.

"Can we reconstitute our ability to see over the battlefield?" asked the President.

"Of course we can, within about two weeks," pledged the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff.

"So, if I understand this right, we'll be just as blind as they for half a month?" voiced the President with a note of concern.

"Mr. President, we have national assessment means other than those in orbit. Those abilities, many of which are black programs, can fill in until our orbital assets are reconstituted."

"So we'll still be able to see afterwards?" asked the President.

"Within hours we will be back on line and omnipotent," reassured the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff.

"When will the targets be hit?"

"They should be taken out within the hour, Sir," checked AI.

"Lee, what do you think?" the President addressed his Secretary of Defense Lee Roalnvoo. "Should we spell out exactly what we've done afterwards as a sign that no further action will be taken against Lea's strategic assets, that this was only a limited strike, and that we understand their likely response in kind to our escalation?"

Lee cleared his throat distinctly before answering. "Mr. President, I think that is the least you can do. As AI pointed out earlier, this is an escalation of the conflict. The DOD (Department of Defense) is counting on their response in kind, but we have to be aware of the possibility that the Lea may chose to further escalate the conflict by attacking our strategic as well as tactical orbital assets. It is my opinion that as soon as the first target is attacked, you should get on the web and contact the Premier of the Larger Euro-Asian union and spell out just how limited this strike was, and that we understand if they have to do the same to us."

"Don't you think that will endanger our pilots if we warn them as soon as we attack?" asked the President.

"I'll defer that one to the DOD," was all Lee replied.

"Of course it will," stated the hawkish AI. "Many of those satellites are equipped with active defenses. If any of the Tavs arrive on target late, they'll gladly trade a 1/4 billion dollar satellite for a 3 billion dollar Tav by going suicidal," said AI. Going suicidal was

the defense way of saying the satellite would blow itself up when the attacking Tav was in close proximity to the satellite.

"I certainly do not want to endanger any of our cream cadre of pilots," confessed the President.

"Nor should you," cautioned Al.

"Looks like you're out voted on this one Lee," offered the President.

"Let's just hope they stay 'legal'," was Lee's way of saying he hoped they responded with appropriateness.

Just then, an aide opened the door briskly and raced over to the President. The aide had a piece of paper in his hand, which he handed to his superior, who scanned the document quickly and somberly. The President let the letter fall to the desk and leaned back in his chair, looking his Vice President in the eyes.

"Stew, we have a problem," began the President.

"What now, Ernst?" queried the veep.

"We have ourselves a new war on our hands," he said grimly as he shook his head in disbelief and shock.

"What is it?" asked Lee.

"There's been a bombing at the Michigan State Capitol," he began.

Gasps of horror met the President's announcement.

"I just got the letter of responsibility. Its from the Michigan Militia, the Dryden office, and they just declared their opening shot in the secession of Michigan from the Union," he continued.

What, was everyone's cry as no one could believe the news.

"The fax includes the latest Gips picto and it clearly shows that the Capitol and everything around it for a distance of 600 meters is completely demolished." announced the President.

"When?" asked Lee.

"Within the last five minutes," confirmed Ernst.

Members of the assembled cabinet shook their heads in a united sense of disbelief. Lee wished previous administrations had taken care of the militia problem back when they were mostly loosely knit, unemployed, white, uneducated losers, who just liked guns and wanted to keep the right to bear arms. Instead, they spinelessly caved in to the NRA and their political action millions of dollars in donations to Congressional campaigns and appeased them (and of course we should all remember the disaster of Chamberlain's appeasement of Adolph Hitler!).

"What do we do now?" asked the Attorney General, Henry Carr.

"You're the Attorney General, any suggestions?" queried the President.

"It sounds to me from reading this letter," he finished purusing the fax, "that they're blaming Waco, an event that occurred fifty years ago, McVeigh's execution for his blowing up the Oklahoma City federal building, the Governor of Michigan's imposition of martial law in the affected county's and their subsequent forced disarming of citizens, and this South Lyon incident, for their actions," Carr paused before continuing.

"I can assure you Mr. President, that we have every militia group infiltrated, per Presidential Directive PD75 as issued by former President Greely. This act must have been caused by some rogue element, and only later did the Headquarters for the militia claim responsibility. We would have known ahead of time had this been part of any coordinated strike against us on their part," he offered.

"So what are you saying?" asked President.

"What I'm saying is that I don't believe these so called militia members can fight cohesively."

"So you're suggesting some kind of military action be staged against them?" asked Ernst.

"Of course I am. The Governor already has the guard in place to do the job. All he has to do is light a fire under their asses and get them to do their jobs of disarming," announced the Attorney General.

"If I may interject," interrupted Al Severly.

"Sure, by all means," acquiesced Henry.

"I've reviewed the reports the guard units are sending back to command. They aren't doing the job they've been assigned to do effectively because there is no clear mandate on how to accomplish their job. All they've been told is to disarm the citizens with a reasonable amount of force. Not even in humanitarian missions have the military's hands been tied so much. I think that South Lyon incident was a brave act that should be rewarded and repeated by the other units. Unfortunately, most of the guard seems to have second thoughts about shooting their own citizens."

"Oh, and the regular army wouldn't?" asked Lee sarcastically.

"Fuck no! My troops are professionals. Give them the mandate they need to do the job and they'll have the militia under control in a matter of days," offered Al.

"You're forgetting, we're fighting on one front already. We don't have enough troops to fight two simultaneous wars in a win-win scenario, thanks to the budget cuts at the turn of the century," quipped Lee.

Al turned to the President and looked him in the eye somberly. "Ernst, you need to decide which is in the greater national interest - protecting our allies in the South, or keeping this great country of ours from fracticiding into anarchy and revolution."

"The choice is clear, gentleman," declared the President. "The militia's declared war and secession must be vanquished. Like President Lincoln nearly two hundred years before, *I sit at a table now divided*. Our national interest lies in preserving the union now, as then. And, in the same kind of venue that the Civil War was a battle to end the barbarity of slavery by the south, I think this is a battle to end the cries of the murdered

victims, more each year in this country than died during the Vietnam and Persian Gulf Wars of the last century combined, and of the dying cities and their poor. I envision a greater America coming from this war's conclusion," said the President with a tear running down his face. "We must reclaim America and restore the peace. It is thus that I order Presidential Directive PD109 to entail the direct involvement of the U.S. military in subduing first the militia, their hierarchy, their logistics, and their morale, and then the secondary threat of the rioters. As a tertiary goal, we shall fight in the Caribbean a hold-win strategy. Paramount to our secondary goal, I hereby direct that non-lethal means be utilized to subdue the rioters. As for the militia, I order that the full force of the Greater United States military be brought to bear against them. I want this revolution of theirs put to as stop before it spreads across the country like a wildfire. Al, your forces have free reign to target whomever and whatever to accomplish your goals. Get in touch with the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) and the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, and Firearms (ATF) to identify possible targets. Go ahead and cut the head off the chicken. Are you clear on my Directive?"

"Yes Sir," stated Al emphatically. "I'll convene the J.C.S. right away. Oh, and what do you want us to do about Celestial Sweep. Its already in works, you know."

"Shit," said the President as he pounded the desk firmly. "Terminate the offensive. We'll have to cool things off a while down there while we deal with domestic issues."

"But Ernst," interjected Lee, "Our hand has already been tipped. They may have already picked up our Tavs flights and may have guessed their intentions. And, if we do

nothing, our carriers will still be at the approaching fleet's mercy, which I can guarantee will be shortcoming."

The President sat back thoughtfully for a few moments before coming to a decision. "Withdrawal the carrier battle groups to our territorial waters. Let the Lea know that if they attack the fleet there, they'll be attacking direct G.U.S. interests, and will risk a much wider war. I'll have Secretary of State Simpson get on the web and make it quite clear to the Lea the pain they'll have to endure should they foolishly attack our national assets."

The Secretary of Defense shook his head thankfully, and gave a brief thank you to his superior.

"If there's no more questions, you have an engagement with the militia to plan," he addressed Al and Henry with a stern meeting adjourned look. The briefing finished, each man set about their assigned tasks.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Bruce Davidson excitedly awaited the approach of the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff and his cadre of officers. Bruce has been waiting decades to demolish the militia movement, and now his dream was here at last. Bruce felt, if left unchecked, the militias posed the gravest threat to the G.U.S., even more so than the Lea. As a

staunch republicist, he did not want to see his great country follow in the footsteps of Greece and Rome. Although the country was only two hundred and seventy years old, Davidson was determined to help it last a thousand years or more!

The door to his office opened, and in stepped an aide.

"Sir, Chairman Severly and his staff have arrived."

"Thank you, send them in," he instructed.

The Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, twelve of his officers, and the Director of the Bureau of ATF, John Lasjurski, walked confidently into the modern room. They took their seats at the large table, while each grabbed their pocoms and hyper linked them together wirelessly. Once each person was finished setting up their individual workstations, they sat back in their chairs, arms folded neatly and uniformly before them.

Bruce waited until each was similarly situated, indicating their state of readiness to begin the proceedings. Bruce called up the project file on his deskcom and had it distributed to each of the networked pocoms. An audible tone announced the transfer was complete.

"Gentleman," he began, "thank you for coming at such a short notice. I guess I'm to think that the President has given the domestic agenda his utmost priority?" he asked for confirmation of the urgency he sensed from reading his flash fax received only hours ago.

"That is correct," confirmed AI.

"Given the short notice, I've only prepared a brief introductory on each subject. As there are over two dozen majors involved in the militia movement inside Michigan, it took quite a while for the search engine to reply to your requested parameters. I hope you'll find everything you need," he attempted to chill his guest's expectations.

"Your timely cooperation is greatly appreciated," ass kissed Lee Roalnvoo. Not that he needed to, after all, he is the Secretary of Defense. However, he learned long ago that those in government need to be persuaded that their efforts are appreciated, even when it just meant doing their routine jobs.

Shall I begin with a brief overview of the major combatants, or do you just want the targeting information?" asked Bruce.

AI looked at Lee who nodded his head in silent thought. "I just need to know where the bombs go," stated AI.

"O.K." said Bruce as he displayed on everyone's pocoms a multispectral image indicating topography and Gips coordinates of various targets throughout Michigan. Utilizing his glide point, Bruce highlighted each target and ran through their specifics. In all, nearly thirty individual aim points were depicted, each one corresponding to a particular leader of an arm of the Michigan Militia. By far, the majority of the points were in rural areas. The kind of people that despised the government also disliked cities and urban sprawl. The targets were given numbers, from one through twenty-eight, that corresponded to that person's threat level, with one being the highest. Number one was

to have been Mike Jones's farm in Fowlerville, but the Director already knew he was deceased more than likely as a result of the Capitol city bombing. Replacing Mr. Jones was a dot near Adrian, Michigan. Upon close examination, a fat slob of a man of Mexican origin and his rotund wife's images were displayed. Several aliases were mentioned, but the most common reference was to a Mr. and Mrs. Spie. No occupation was given, although it is rumored the man is engaged in illegal private investigations practices without a license. This is not surprising, since neither of them had a driver's license, and yet, there were four luxurious transports parked in front of the large house. Various attempts at tax collections had been made, and yet, on paper, the two of them owned none of their possessions. Because of family connections with the police, no attempt at an arrest was ever made, even though they should have gone to the slammer decades ago for vigilantism and other unamerican activities. Both had openly advocated a violent overthrow of the government, state and federal. Like the Freemen of Montana, neither believed the government had any jurisdiction over their lives. Through the world wide web, they networked with other like minded people and distributed plans to attack various governmental centers, including FBI and ATF Headquarters and field offices. There was circumstantial evidence that they were behind many bank heists in Washtenaw County, which helped fund their illegal activities. And, most dangerous of all, the two suspects have made what are believed to be practice runs flying their laden transports directly over the Capitol and Ann Arbor's FBI field office. Just two months ago they flew over the Lansing and dropped leaflets calling for the repressed poor to riot downtown and take from the rich what they wanted (of course hiding their own appulant lifestyle from view lest they be attacked as well!).

They didn't care who they dealt with, as long as they hated the government, even nazis and KKK were admitted into their grand scheme to defrock the government of it's shadow into American's lives. And, just like Mike Jones, there are numerous blue plastic 55-gallon drums hidden in their pole barn (which space based ground penetrating synthetic aperture radar [SAR] resolved). And their neighbors had complained of large explosions occurring occasionally on the mansion grounds. Yes, Bruce was satisfied that he had ranked the Spies properly.

"As you can see from the SAR image, there is quite a stockpile of potential explosives in the pole barn. If your boys could take that barn out and neutralize the Spies for, say, 36 hours until the regular army can be brought in to apprehend them, I'd appreciate it greatly," Bruce asked of them.

"No problem, we can take that pole barn out easy," said Al. "Do you want us to use goo on their house, keep 'em locked inside until the regulars get in situ?" he asked.

"Yes. It is my understanding that we want to utilize non violent combat means on these criminals (who so far have only thought about or talked about doing harm to others) so we can apprehend them. As for their munitions, you have free will to use any degree of violence necessary to achieve our goals of denying them their explosives, sidearms, rifles, shot guns, and any other potentially lethal weapons from their possession," answered Bruce.

"Does that include bombing their kitchen? After all, their are knives that can stab, alcohols that can burn, chemicals that can blind, I mean, where does this all end?"

asked one of the officers sympathetic towards the militia's goals of preserving the right to bear arms.

"Ah yes, the liberal view that either all rights should be held sacrosanct or they should all be dealt away with," brushed aside Bruce. "We're not here to prevent murder by any means, we're going to preserve this nation by denying these and other criminals the ability to kill en masse with fire arms that no person should ever need to have, let alone need."

"I'm not here to debate with you," stated the young skin head. "But even if you gathered all of the guns and explosives we can find, the criminals will be the only ones who'll still have them, leaving the average Joe defenseless against rape, car jackings, robberies, and so on," he countered.

"Al, he's your boy, can't you muzzle him," prodded Bruce.

Al Severly cleared his throat commandingly before jumping into the fray of things.

"Lieutenant Mead, we're not here to gather the individual guns of citizens trying to legally protect themselves with a shotgun or to hunt for food with a rifle or two. On the contrary, tonight we're going after the criminals who have given the right to bear arms a bad name. People like this who have automatic weapons, mines, explosives, and other *weapons* designed for only one thing - killing en masse. Bruce is not going to confiscate the guns needed for hunting or other legitimate needs, only those *weapons* whose sole purpose is to kill and kill again. No one on this Earth other than the military needs such devices. What we're doing is to even the playing field between the

criminals who have such weapons and the average law abiding citizen who only has a gun to defend himself, his property, or whatever. Our job is to protect the country from these militia men who would try to seize power and unleash upon our great country a killing spree unprecedented in history. It's already happening in the suburbs of Detroit, where the militia has decimated the rioters there. That's why the national guard was sent in - to protect the unfortunate and poorly armed rioters who are so desperate for food, money, and employment that they took to the streets in a futile effort at instigating some kind of change for the better. Instead, its left many of them dead, and has given the Militia movement its opening shot in their war of secession," lectured Al Severly uncharacteristically to the ignorant underling.

The junior officer said stunned at the public humiliation he had just been dealt.

There was thoughtful silence by all for a long few moments as each reflected on what said.

"You do understand that we're not going to just disarm the militia in Michigan, but the rioters as well, and we'll sweep the whole country within a matter of days, riding our society of the nuisance of guns forever from our streets, hopefully ending our domestic violence problem and reducing crime as well," asked Bruce.

"No, I never had the big picture," confessed the naive officer. "Still, it sounds like mission creep to me."

"Al, don't you brief these guys before they get here?" asked Bruce.

"No, there wasn't time. The order came down only hours ago, and this militia thing has been out of our jurisdiction until the latest Presidential Directive. I'm afraid we have no intelligence on this issue at best, or as was just demonstrated here, at worst we have misinformation on the true situation at hand," stated Al.

"Well, just to get the record straight, all we need from the military is the plan for the disarming of the militia tonight, as well as the separation of the rioters and the other combatants. Once that goal is accomplished, the guard units and civil police can handle the job from there. There is to be no mission creep from the armed services. Just get the job done as painlessly as possible. Massive casualties on either side will only serve to strengthen the militia's hand," clarified Davidson.

"That is correct," confirmed Al Severly.

"Good, then shall we continue this briefing unopposed?" asked Bruce, looking the junior officer squarely in the eyes.

The young man swallowed hard before giving a meager yes.

Bruce Davidson and John Lasjurski ran down each of the remaining twenty seven targets they have amassed through years of quiet intelligence gathering infiltrations. After the planning, the largest military operation in almost two hundred years to be conducted on American soil was in preparation. Only fourteen hours lay between now and zero hour.

CHAPTER EIGHT

I had the enemy satellite in my sights. I was awaiting the signal from the atcom to fire. Only minutes away from firing, I scanned the area looking for **Firedarts**. None were present. Just then my cocom announced an abort. Abort my ass, I thought as I yelled an expletive and hit my leg with the full force of my fist. Sensing I was still on my combat run, the cocom queried my confirmation of the abort.

"Confirm abort per emergency action message received," it announced dryly.

E.A.M? Only the JCS could call an abort via flash traffic, I remembered. Something dramatic must have happened to abort the mission less than four minutes from time on target. "Is the flash traffic authentic?" I asked the cockpit computer.

"Traffic has been authenticated," was the only reply.

"Dammit!" I swore. I hated to abort any mission, especially one that was so nearly complete. And, I was certain we would have to do this mission for real some time in the future. Having just completed a dry run of sorts, next time the enemy will know our intentions and move to intercept. I hoped the chiefs at the JCS knew what they were doing, I wondered as I changed course to return to launch (RTL) site.

Just as I completed my revolution away from the target, my radar warning receivers (RWR) lit up announcing a threat coming at me from my -V bar, below and ahead of my craft. The rules of engagement were simple. Prior to initiation of hostilities, I could only

return fire. After initiation of hostilities, I could attack at will. Being that the mission was aborted, I will have to wait for the Lea's first shot, and pray to God that it misses so I can return fire, hopefully to annihilate the enemy craft. Instinctually, I sprayed out my entire supply of on board water. The resultant droplets will serve to confuse the Doppler return of my craft and reflect lidar ranging and targeting information. Additionally, I ordered chaff dispensed, and released the towed active emitting decoy, designed to lure enemy missiles away from my fighter. I ceased all forward movement and began a rearward motion, still maintaining my forward line of sight to the enemy **Firedart**. From above and behind, I increased distance between myself and the enemy as rapidly as the RCS would allow, the propellant budget be damned. Enveloped by an expanding cloud of water droplets, the enemy radar could not achieve lock on. Unfortunately, the same was true for me of him - I could not get lock on either, no matter how true my bearing on target. I wished I had FOG missiles aboard, ones that are guided by pulses of light along a fiber optic cable. Unfortunately, there was no money for procurement of the already demonstrated technology.

A pulse of light emitted from the left wing indicated a missile launch toward me. My defensive computer (defcom) assured me that it was unguided, but it went straight for me. Shit! It looks like its going to hit me, I thought. Then, the defcom identified the approaching missile as an IR or UV guided missile, one that is not fooled by water droplets or towed active emitting decoys. I dispensed all my craft's flares and held my breath as the missile approached. The smart flare flew ahead of me in an intercept mode, blazing in all known frequencies utilized by enemy missiles. The two multi million dollar missiles flew towards each other, guided by gallium arsenide super high density

Mflop parallel processors and their software architecture. I began to breathe again as they continued to close true. The only sound I heard was the positive pressure suit respiratory system pumping air into my face plate. Suddenly, the proximity equipped fuse of the enemy missile triggered, causing a massive explosion that sent deadly shrapnel in an expanding sphere of debris moving at the rate of 120 meters per second. There was no escape I knew, so I did the only thing I could. I rotated my craft to 90 degrees angle of attack, and used the belly of the ship as a shield.

At the same time, I called up gips targeting information on the enemy. I fed the calculated coordinates of the **Firedart** to my atcom and fired two missiles. The missiles arced straight out and then made a full 120 degree turn toward the enemy. As both missiles were equipped with ADMS (air data modems), the position of the enemy was updated every second by national technical means. There was no escape for the bogie, I knew. Facing 120 degrees away from the target, I would not get to see the results of the attack directly, but the gips should confirm a good kill. Before my missiles hit, I was overtaken by the deadly cloud of debris from the enemy missile. The thermal protection system was a fragile yet robust necessity that protected the craft during the Mach 25 entry into Earth's atmosphere. However, micro meteorites and ice chips from the hypergolic super cool slush hydrogen fueled tank easily damaged the excelofrax skin. The high velocity fragments of the missile effortlessly passed through the thermal blankets, exploding with full force against the carbon fiber exoskeleton. Decimeter sized holes were punched through the skin and penetrated into the number one oxygen fuel tank. I braced myself for an explosion, finger on the eject handle shaking nervously. My Tav began to drift as the force of the outward rush of oxygen changed

my velocity vector. The Tav was equipped with a bladder that seals upon contact with the atomic oxygen and near vacuum of space. I wondered whether the bladder was up to the job. I watched the gauge on the number one fuel tank drop rapidly towards zero. As it continued to drop, I also kept an eye on the gips information of the **Firedart**. Within seconds, the enemy craft disappeared from gips, to be replaced by a cloud of debris and an ejected emergency crew cabin. It was some consolation, but I began to wonder whether I would make it home or not. As my precious fuel flowed away into space, I watched the ejected crew cabin stabilize itself utilizing the magnetic field of the Earth for stabilization. I imagined the pilot calling frantically for a rescue, not knowing the condition of my aerospace plane or my imagined intentions toward capturing him and entombing him in my small cargo bay. And he would not be alone. As my fuel reached Bingo, I would need rescuing too. Without fuel for the orbital maneuvering system (OMS), all I could do is pivot around yaw, pitch, and roll. I was in a more vulnerable position, as I was still in my Tav, which would surely be a target for the next **Firedart** that arrived. As long as the enemy pilot was alive, he would be radioing information to his forces about me. I checked my inventory: I still had two KKV's and enough charge in the laser to last through four engagements. It was time for me to think of my own survival first, and worry about the expectant enemy reinforcements later. I figured I would have 90 minutes before another **Firedart** would be near. I knew that it would be about 200 minutes before any **Eagles** could arrive to rescue me. This is because the whole squadron was engaged in this mission, which meant there would be no room in their cargo bays for my crew cabin once I eject since no missiles had been expended (I thought). Calmly, I radioed my position and condition to command

headquarters and awaited their reply. I was correct in my assumption - it would be nearly three hours before a rescue attempt would be made. Until then, I was on my own. Briefly, I thought of firing on the enemy pilot. As long as he was alive, the Lea would know I was alive as well. So instead, I placed the Tav in the free drift mode, knowing I would leave the protection of my water vapor cloud and the dispensed chaff. If I appeared to be dead, maybe I could get the jump on the next **Firedart** that came by. I initiated a slight 10 degree conning motion to appear out of action. I checked the chrono. Eighty three minutes until probable intercept. I fed real time data directly from gips into the atcom and placed my missiles on arm. Like a spider lying in wait on a web, I awaited a bug to fly into my trap. It was going to be a long day..

For the first time in my life, I had over an hour of free time to do nothing except for gaze at the beauty of the globe below. I saw lightning fire off like popcorn in the middle of the night over Africa. I could see that Australia was nearly cloudless, and her reddish orange deserts were breathtaking. I could see smoke from burning tropical rain forests in South America. Or was it smoke from villages ablaze thanks to the war there? I did not know. I wondered why the operation was recalled. And I thought of Linda, during my predicament. How I wished she was here to comfort me. But then, she'd be in as much danger as I, and I would hate to put her in harms way. The steady silence save for the sound of my space suit gave me much time for reflection. I have told Linda every time we were together how much I loved her. She also said she loved me too, but that she did not want to lose her family. I could understand that, after all, she was

basically my only family as well, and I know how I would feel if something happened to her. Six years of teasing, constant flirtations, and desire, led eventually to love. Emotions I had never felt before swelled in me (well, that did too) each time we were together. I wanted to spend my life with her, and had told her so on more than one occasion. And now I was facing the possibility of losing her, and of my own mortality. In the simulators, the rescuers always arrived on time and before any marauding **Firedarts** appeared. I knew reality would be much different. I swore to myself that if I ever get back to the base alive, I will ask for her hand in marriage. Other than getting back to the base alive, she was all I thought of as I awaited bandits.

Nearly ninety minutes later, the defcom announced an incoming **Firedart**. I could see it move against the backdrop of the slowly rotating Earth beneath me. From the defcom I was able to obtain a track on it, and found to my surprise it was on an intercept course for the ejected crew cabin. It may cost 20 million Euros in fuel to fly a mission to rescue a Tav pilot, but it cost 135 million Euros to train one. Hence, they are considered very valuable assets and worth any cost of acquiring. And, to capture an enemy Tav pilot would be a prized intelligence bonanza. I hoped the **Firedart** did not have any such ideas towards me!

I continued to watch the **Firedart** close in on the ejected crew cabin. So far, the enemy paid no attention to my stricken **Eagle**. A long many minutes went by as the two craft closed at only a few meters per second. The final 2,000 feet took almost 15 minutes to complete the rendezvous. As the Tav performed station keeping maneuvers next to the surviving pilot, the mid deck cargo bay doors opened to space, to greet the Earth below.

A small remote manipulator system (RMS) ungainly worked its way out of the cargo hold and grappled the cabin. It took another five minutes to reel the pod inside and to close the cargo hold. I could tell there was no room left in the hold, so apparently there were no designs toward capturing me. In fact, once the cargo doors were completely sealed, the Tav reduced its altitude and began to "fly" away from me. I waited for a full twenty minutes to make sure the Tav would not suddenly change course toward me. It did not. When I could no longer make out the red, white, and blue star emblem, I attacked. I fired one missile at the enemy, conserving a shot for later. The missile, guided directly from gips, homed in on its target and closed distance rapidly. As the missile was in a passive guided mode, no emissions of any kind were required by the missile to hit it's target. The enemy pilot did not even know he had been fired upon when the entire rear OMS section of his craft exploded. Only the forward fuselage remained intact, and that was tumbling and conning out of control, as well as descending rapidly toward the atmosphere. There would be no rescue for that pilot, I knew. He will burn up on entry into the Earth's atmosphere well before any kind of rescue can be attempted. I said a silent prayer for his soul. I know I would not want to burn up in the zone either.

After a few minutes, I began to reassess the situation. I had one missile left and four shots worth of laser. But, the Lea will probably try to blow me up from BVR (Beyond visual range) before risking a search and destroy mission against me. I checked my chrono. Only two hours to go. I put the atcom on automatic and did the only thing I could do. I ejected from the **Eagle**, set aloft to drift until the passive aerodynamically

stabilized, magnetically dampened survival ship (PAMSS) stabilized my orbit. I have six hours of air, plenty of time before a rescue attempt is made.

Over an hour later, on my third orbit, I was in awe of the view below me. Such splendors from above, and yet on the ground, in the air, and on the sea, men and women of the East and West were facing each other in deadly combat. Suddenly, there was a brilliant flash of light. The Tav behind me, my **Eagle**, was blown to pieces by an extremely energetic kinetic kill vehicle. As I sought to overcome my startlement, I frantically looked in all directions, expecting to see a **Firedart** closing in. A quick reconnaissance of the area denied the existence of any enemy Tavs in the area. For a few minutes, I sat in my sweat, pondering how my craft had been shot at. As Asia rapidly rotated out of view beneath me, it dawned upon me that I had been fired at by an ASAT launched from Pleytsk. I thanked god that I had enough sense to leave the dubious safety of the Tav. For had I not ejected, I would be dead now, I remarked to myself. I checked the chrono - only 45 minutes before I would be rescued. I breathed a sigh of relief. There would not be any time for another attack by the Lea before then, I knew. Relaxed now, I continued to gaze down upon the Earth below. No one has ever had more than a few tens of minutes of sightseeing in the history of Space flight. I felt extremely privileged to be able to spend several revolutions taking in the view. I knew I would be the envy of every Star Pilot in the force once I got back and told them of my exploits. And, as I silently hummed Jean Michel Jarre music to myself, I could not wait to get back to base and call Linda to propose to her. Well, then again not. It would be better if I did that in person, I thought. So I decided to wait until we got together again before proposing. But I would still call her, nonetheless.

CHAPTER NINE

Late that night, the national headquarters for the militia (at the Spie residence, in Adrian, Michigan) was packed with representatives from all over the country - including members of the deadly Phoenix Viper militia that succeeded in bombing many federal office buildings in Arizona before most of their members were arrested and thrown in jail for conducting acts of terrorism. They were there to plan their attack against the major federal installations all across the nation in an concerted effort to bring down the government. Harking back to their survivalist roots, they would then institute their own governments, answerable only to themselves. The idea of not having to follow the law and to in fact make the law as you please was very enticing to most of the militia members. Their prior military training and their knowledge of demolitions and their avowed desire to use those weapons made them a deadly force against society. And, it made them the number one target of the stealthy F/A 34 ***Thunderbolt III*** ground attack aircraft that was commencing its bombing run.

With the advent of precision guided munitions (PGMs) during the later part of the twentieth century, one plane, one bomb, became the normal attack force. The days of massed flights to kill one target ended during the '90s with the advent of the JSOW (Joint standoff weapon) and other fire and forget long range missiles. Traveling just under Mach one, the airplane did not have to get within 40 miles of its target to release

the missile. Utilizing Gips information and known coordinates of the target pole barn where the meeting was being held, the missile would fire itself when a good firing solution was created, and then fly its own best route to the target.

Presidential Directive PD-109 set into motion a great war plan designed to crush the entire militia movement with one night's divergent attacks. Targets across the country will be hit by PGMs simultaneously, without warning, and with great violence, yet with no collateral damage. At the top of the list were, of course, Michigan militia targets, after all, they're the ones who started the revolution. Concurrent with the strikes on the militia, will be aerial dispensed *goo* attacks along all major intersections within the battle zone of the militia and the rampaging marauders from Detroit. *Goo* was developed by Sandia National Laboratories as a non violent method of subduing a hostile crowd. Given all of the humanitarian missions the armed forces were forced into by the politicians, there needed to be a weapon so capable and yet be harmless to the individuals sprayed with the substance. *Goo* is a foam, sprayable up to 20 feet by a soldier, or capable of being dispensed by airplane over a wide area. Upon contact with the air, the *goo* begins to form a rubbery substance that is impossible to remove by oneself. Persons sprayed with the compound become immobilized until a police force or MP unit can move in and physically cut the person out of the mess they've gotten themselves into. If sprayed by airplane, whole groups of rioters can be hit and immobilized. Even automobiles and trucks are affected by the substance, effectively stopping their motion. Thus, the generals war plan deals effectively with the entire problem, from cutting the head off the militia chicken, to rendering immobile those forces of rioters and militiamen who are in direct contact with each other. Once the *goo*

is dispersed over the affected areas, the national guard can move in and return the citizens to where they came from. The wider political difficulties, that of why the riot started in the first place and how to prevent another, and why the militia struck, will be dealt with by the politicians later. As for now, the generals have a war to fight, and one they intend on winning (OK., except for the Iraqi army, I can't think of any army aside from the Japanese Kamikazes going into battle planning on losing!)

Within one second of the predicted timing, the airplane bolted upwards into the air, now 2,000 pounds lighter as the PGM blasted towards its target. The plane turned around and headed back for base, there being no reason to stick around. Gips will be able to provide real time bomb damage assessment (BDA).

To the traitors inside the pole barn, all was normal. The leaders of each state's militia unit were busily preparing plans for a massive attack on every federal building they could find. And, one elite unit from each state would make up a massive striking force, with one destination in mind - the White House. There would be no covering of their tracks by renting vans from Ryder. No, this was open warfare, and they wanted the feds to know who they were at war with, you know, seemingly normal people that share a common goal of killing and maiming dozens of innocent people and babies like the true cowards they are. No, the militias did not even attempt to attack directly any of the federal troops or the national guard that killed one of theirs in South Lyon. To do so would be to lose, they surely knew. So instead, they turned to the only weapon they had, of terrorism (and cowardliness).

To the oncoming missile, the target was just that, an entity that only existed as a set of coordinates. During the six minute subsonic flight to the target, there were no thoughts of the people the missile would kill, no remorse. On the other hand, there was no joy over the potentially thousands of federal personnel who will be saved as a result of this one attack. The pilot would never see the eyes of his opponent, see their flesh burn alive, or smell them after their deaths. Neither would the missile. So in a seemingly hiku kind of way, the act of using a PGM to kill 50 supposedly human beings was an act of cowardice as well. Or, in the Air Force's view, it is an act of great precision lethality with minimal consequences - collateral or to the combatant (pilot).

Regardless, at precisely the predicted timing, the missile blew through the roof and dived through the second and first floors, to bury itself twelve feet below the basement, and then explode! There was literally nothing left of the house. Just a large crater, 55 feet across and twenty feet deep. Body parts were strewn as far as 200 yards away from the blast. There were no survivors. No one would ever know of the plans that had been laid to blow up the White House. And, thankfully, no President will ever feel the pressure wave of a detonating fuel truck as had happened in Dhahran Saudi Arabia in 1996.

All across Michigan, known leaders of the militias were targeted and dealt with in a similar manner. As for the rioters, the *goo* worked as advertised, immobilizing them until National Guard troops descended upon them, cut them out of their binds, removed their weapons, and loaded them into deuce and a half trucks, to be returned to the city

of their origin. All recovered weapons were promptly melted down. Polls conducted the following morning showed overwhelming support for the decisive action against the militias. Never again would they be a threat to national security.

CHAPTER TEN

"Paul, we got a flash a few minutes ago that the Lea is powering up their Tavs. It could be just a show of force," said General Mely.

"Or it could be a preemptive strike," I surmised, still recovering from my routine rescue the night before.

"That's what the JCS thinks as well. I have an Alert briefing to give in...six minutes," he said as he checked his chrono. "Here's the latest down link from NIMA," he said as he handed me a hyper cube. containing three terabytes of images, targeting lists, targeting solutions, simulated attack profiles, and various war gaming attempts and their outcomes. "Be at the meeting yesterday," he said with a sense of urgency.

"Yes Sir," I arose and saluted stiffly.

The general turned and left to prepare himself for the presentation he was about to give.

I hurriedly inserted the HC data into the miscom (mission computer), began the task of download, and headed for the Alert briefing, all the while reviewing the past several days events.

Shortly after the sinking of the Nuclear powered aircraft carrier **Bastille** by our forces, CVN 88 Harry S. Truman was attacked and sank while sailing in US territorial waters off the coast of Florida. Both sides met in security council that night to identify proper responses. The Lea struck the next day, conducting a pre dawn raid utilizing sub launched cruise missiles on a US airfield in Honduras. All of the site's aircraft, the only squadron of special forces aerial gunships, were destroyed or heavily damaged. The US response was to eliminate both Lea AWACs that were patrolling the disputed Central American States. Increasingly fierce ground combat was encountered as both sides sought to gain additional positions prior to the world powers intervening.

Earlier this morning, an advanced Seawolf II nuclear powered attack submarine sank two frigates and a PPSS (pre-positioned supply ship) sailing out of Portsmouth headed toward the Caribbean. Only a few hours ago, Argentina, sensing the Lea occupied elsewhere, sought once more to recapture the Malvinas Islands (or as the rest of the world views them, the Falkland Islands) by landing their entire light mechanized airborne division onshore. The United Nations Assembly, having survived nearly 100 years through thirty seven localized wars, was in danger of being voted out of existence, with the Security Council deadlocked as each side vetoed each other's resolutions. All

this had led the US and LEA to go to Defcon three, providing each with a strategic warning of the other's intent and will.

"Attention!" Barked a Space Marine as General Mely briskly entered the mission room and returned the salutes of his officers.

He strode to the front center of the room and quickly had his pocom access the room's computer via wireless IR transmission. The large classroom sized monitor behind him sprang to life, displaying the NIMA Departmental Seal. The General studiously studied the anxiously and somewhat nervously waiting audience prior to commencing his briefing. Satisfied that he had everyone's attention, he began.

"Ladies and gentlemen, at 2208 GMT (Greenwich Mean Time), 1408 Zulu, Space Command inside Cheyenne Mountain received an emergency flash message from NIMA." A thematic image of the Avignon Military Complex, Southwest of Paris, was displayed on the monitor. Seven Transatmospheric vehicles, the entire squadron, were in tandem on the runway, surrounded by numerous field personnel donning HAZMAT suits attaching hoses to them. "This is a real time feed from Gips. Note the characteristic cooling of the Tavs as their cryogenics are being loaded." The image transitioned from the visible spectrum to the far infrared. Five of the black bodied war machines indicated their holding tanks were filled with hypergolic slush hydrogen and oxygen fuels, ready for lift-off. The remaining two were nearly completed with their fueling. Their weapons bays were already full of the deadly accurate Glosnass assisted PGKVs (precision guided kill vehicles). "Space Command estimates they are only one hour, fifteen minutes from launch."

The projection changed to indicate a map of larger Euro-Asia. Color coded contoured circles were evident everywhere. However, a few scattered areas were shaded in red, which indicated the highest level of activity. "This is a elint (electronic intelligence) image of the continent provided two days ago. Those red areas correspond expectedly well with the major metropolitan areas." A new image was displayed on the same NIMA basemap, to the surprise and acknowledgment as to what it meant. The number and size of the red areas increased eight-fold. "This was prepared only twenty minutes ago. As you can readily see, the frequency, intensity, and duration, of elint activity has increased significantly, and corresponds to areas of major military installations." Careful study of the figure revealed an anomalous circle near the Kazikistan town of Aktyubinsk. The general zoomed in on the area and rapidly blinked between previous and current activity figures to highlight the level of change. Where two days before there was complete absence of any electromagnetic activity at all, now there was the highest peak value recorded anywhere on the map. "An interesting occurrence, we had Nima perform a quick statistical check to make sure this was not some mere artifact of the processing software. I can assure you, Nima stands by this report, and they have sent the latest processed, stretched, and data fused pictos to exemplify the situation," continued Mely. A complex three dimensional hologram showing thematic mapping data from all available spectra (UV, visible, IR, far IR, aeromagnetic data, bouger gravimetric values, exaggerated vertical elevations, and ground penetrating radar data was displayed. From the visible and topographic data, one could easily tell the image was of a mountainous, semi-arid region, with sparse, thin, coal seams, sandwiched between hogback outcrops of sandstone and limestone of the middle Jurassic Era, and

occasionally cross cut by younger basaltic dikes. Alluvial fan activity indicated extensive weathering of the mountainous terrain has occurred. A basin was evident in the southwestern region of the map, and the spectra indicated marine deposits of lower Cretaceous marls, clays, and chinks that were laid down during a large marine transgression. Photoreconnaissance notes indicated areas of open pit phosphate mining operations. A small national collective village housing the workers was located close to the mines. A large ultra basic batholith dominates the northeastern area of the figure. A histogram oriented legend on the side of the map indicated the massif was rich in platinum and chromite deposits. Several mine shafts were evident, and large piles of slag were dumped haphazardly. It was the area of this large mountain where the general zoomed further in. At the maximum resolution of one pixel equal to 1/16 of a meter, it became clear to us all why there was a look of such concern on the general's face as he continued to narrate.

"This is our target, people," he said as he pointed towards a medium sized opening leading into the mountain. Dashed lines indicated a conjectural maze of tunnels as inferred from penetrating radar data. The main entrance, large enough to drive a full size T-25 Main Battle Tank through, penetrated deeply. Embedded in the walls of the excavation were medium pipes for compressed air supplies (presumably to power hydraulic drills). Two massive (2 meter diameter) pipes were suspended from the ceiling. At the entrance to the structure, each pipe had a large focusing apparatus at their terminus. Every sixty feet a large semi-metallic super conducting structure completely surrounded the easterly pipe. Deeper into the construction, the dashed lines

became lighter and thinner as the ability of the radar to penetrate into the mountain fell off sharply as tons of metallic ore containing rock lie overhead.

The general layout seemed to indicate three distinct subsystems of tunnel locations. The first subset, highlighted in green, was indicative of generally accepted mining practices. It was readily apparent that nearly all of the green tunnels followed the same dip and strike of the ore bearing veins. To the contrary, the yellow highlighted tunnels were laid virtually horizontally, with elevational data indicating no deviations within the detection method limits of 5mm. The main yellow tunnel branched into two subtunnels maintaining perpendicularity to each other. Further inwards, these tunnels began to utilize 45 and 90 degree changes of direction of varying lengths, before arriving at two separate large rooms, approximately one kilometer apart. At each of the bends was a large disk shaped structure oriented such that it faced exactly one half of the angle between the two corridors, subtended. The westerly massive piping followed this route. The red tunnel, of which I figure indicates Nima's level of concern, was also laid out to standards above the ability of the detection limits to note deviations. The red corridor penetrated deep into the massif. The main lineac itself was over one kilometer long. At that distance from the opening, the corridor made a 45 degree arc, where the secondary compressor was located. From there, further into the interior of the mountain, there was a 1/4 kilometer pre accelerator tunnel. Another 45 degree reverse curve indicated the proximity of the first stage compressor. A large 1 and 1/8th kilometer diameter circle of the damping ring abutted against the first stage compressor. And finally, in the very bowels of the mountain, at the end of the tunnel, was the main particle source, powered by a small one megawatt light water nuclear reactor.

"Nima believes the Leas have already powered up the site, and they consider it fully operational. I don't have to tell you what that means to our national security, or to you," continued general Mely.

A silenced, apprehensive groan could be heard from the crowd.

"We have been directed, pursuant to Presidential Directive 82, to attempt a pre-emptive strike against the Aktyubinsk Defense Site. Or, as Space Command now confirms, if they become operational as we believe they are, to 'implicitly and with great violence, render that site non-functional'," paused the general.

"To help us in our task, Space Command's war fighting scenarioists have come up with a mission plan that I've given each of you to download into your Tavs. Your planes are loaded with two 3.75 kiloton yield E.P.M.s (Earth penetrating missiles) or three M.H.D. (magneto hydrodynamic) pulse generators. Good hunting and godspeed," he expoused, the briefing finished.

Since World War II, the pace of wars has been steadily increasing. Each new war usually brought better and more sophisticated, if fewer, weapons, better tactics, and an increase in the tempo and duration of operations. Where one hundred years earlier, it was generally a standard operating procedure to bed down at night to fight again the next day, real 24 hour, around the clock operations began with the Desert Storm campaign in the Persian Gulf War in '91. The lethality of individual killing mechanisms, such as PGMs, got their start in W.W.II. Both the allies and the axis experimented and utilized in small numbers radio controlled bombs and missiles to strike import targets.

During the later half of the Vietnam War, a few laser guided bombs dropped from F-4 Phantom II were able to destroy the key bridge transporting North Vietnamese forces that hundreds of sorties had failed to destroy during the previous five years. During the Lebanese Israeli conflict in the 1980s, smart air to air missiles and excellent training of a modern air force was able to rack up an impressive 81-0 kill ratio against Syrian, poorly trained, mostly obsolescent air force. Stealth technology demonstrated to the world on an impressive scale during the Gulf War proved night after night that with the F-117, any target, anywhere, could be hit at night with total impunity. Not one stealth bomber was destroyed by Iraqi fire during three months of nightly sorties. The Persian Gulf War also proved the value of "strike hard, strike deep", employing massive firepower to take out the C3I that the enemy possessed. One dictum that was learned was the great effect a successful first strike has against the offensive and defensive capability of the enemy. As the Pakistani-Indian War proved, 21st Century warfare reaffirmed the adage *use it or lose it*. Also, that war proved the absolute value of intelligence. If able to get strategic warning of an attack, one had adequate time to prepare not only for a defensive battle, but of the necessary offensive strategy a good defense entails. If only able to obtain a tactical warning of an impending attack, quick reaction forces would have to be deployed, ready to go at a moments notice. Large numbers of forward based supplies would have to be strategically situated near the area such that in the event of only tactical warning, the troops need only be ferried to the conflict, the equipment would already be there. But in the case of a surprise attack, where the only warning is the sound of a stealth aircraft delivered missile explosion taking out your dearest C3I assets, a nation also had to be prepared to quickly reconstruct the network. It was

hoped in a protracted war, a nations assets would degrade gracefully, allowing a counterattack recovery. Smaller non aligned nations could not afford to build two sets of assets, only the Lea and Gus could afford to do so.

It was obvious to all of us as we continued our pre-flight check-outs of our avionics, that both major sides were planning to pre-empt the other. Each side has roughly the same C3I capability to determine what the other is doing. The Lea is probably as equally aware of my squadron's cryogenic cool down as we are of theirs. Not since the 1960s, when the former Soviet Union and United States of America held civilization's future in their grasps as missile crews were on 24 hour alert, only minutes from launching their deadly payloads, and bombers carrying city busting multimegaton gravity bombs holding for six hours at their fail safe points, submarines off the coasts of Washington and Murmansk, only minutes by submarine launched ballistic missiles (SLBMs) or cruise missiles, had two nations forces been so cocked and ready for action. Each side was not just sending a political message as Kennedy did by mobilizing the armed services, having bombers make runs on the Russian border, only to turn back after being acquired by Russian radar during the Cuban Missile Crisis. No, this was not another exercise either. Never before in the history of modern warfare had two such capable armed forces, each able to obliterate and extinguish the other side, prepared to strike each other nearly simultaneously. As the countdown to action approached, each pilot on both sides of the Atlantic knew that the whole world, not just the war, will be won or lost because of how man and machine performs today. As I thought of a quote from Sir Winston Churchill, I wondered if my **Firedart** flying counterpart on the longest runway in Europe, at Fairford, England, was remembering the same lines...

"...never before in the history of conflict has so much been owed by so many, to so few..."

CHAPTER ELEVEN

"I won't have it!" Lee Roalnvoo slammed his fist on the large American Oak table in the ready room of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Headquarters. "Its an impossible mission, to think a handful of Tavs can penetrate Lea airspace undetected, fly to within striking distance of their target, and return safely to orbit after a successful mission! Who drew up this plan?" he asked dumbfounded.

"Lee, its a done deal. The President signed off on it twenty minutes ago," stated Al Severly.

"The Defense Secretary looked exasperated. "On whose authority was this plan brought to the President without my knowledge?" demanded Lee.

"We tried to get a hold of you, Sir," said the general more formally. "We felt the urgency demanded an immediate response, given the time criticality of the situation at present."

"And you just so happened to have a plan prepared, ready for immediate approval," said Lee cynically.

"Sir, we do constant wargaming, you know that. The plan we selected for him was just one of thousands we have already run sims on."

"Do you seriously believe these fighters can pull it off?" he asked unsure of the answer.

"That's the 100 billion dollar question, isn't it," the general stared at his superior knowingly.

"Damn you AI. You know you might have just started World War Three," said Lee as he threw his smoldering cigarette butt towards the general.

"We're aware of the risks, Sir. So is the President, and he signed off on it," deflected the three star general.

Lee sat down, exhausted from too much adrenaline usage. He reached into his pocket and pulled out a smoke, lighting it. He inhaled deeply several times, calming himself considerably. "What's their likely reaction?" he refocused his line of questioning.

"As you know, they are the ones who made first clash indications with their Tav squadron firing up. Millie (part of the Millstar battle management automated system) predicts a 87% chance they intend to strike our orbital assets that over look the Caribbean, central and Latin America, and the Atlantic Ocean," explained AI.

"And our response would be.." he asked leadingly.

"To counter in kind by knocking out their space based assets, their ground receiving stations, and key C3I nodes in theater," he said stoically.

"And theirs," continued Lee.

"To respond in kind, of course," Al stated matter of factly.

"Uh huh. And where does this all lead, six or seven retaliations down the lineage," demanded the Defense Secretary.

The general gave an uncomfortable look, giving clear indications he did not want to answer the question.

"General, your answer, I'm waiting," said Lee impatiently.

The general cleared his throat. "Millie believes, and J.C.S. concurs, that should this affair continue without a diplomatic solution before nine incarnations without their backing down, that, uh, a limited counter force nuclear exchange is predicted," confessed Severly.

"Their backing down!" noted Lee passionately.

"The President has assured us that we are not going to blink on this one - that he's willing to see this thing through to its end."

Lee could not believe his ears. The words *to its end* seemed to hang in the air, and gnawed at his stomach. "Is Ernst aware of what *the end* entails?" asked an incredulous Roalnvoo.

"Yes Sir, he is." was the stoic response.

Lee finished his smoke and put the butt out in the tray. He reached for another one, removed one from the carton, and put it between his lips. He reached inside his pocket for the lighter, grasped it, brought it out, and hesitated for a moment, staring at it. Then he tossed it ungainly onto the desk. "I don't suppose I'll be needing this to light my smokes anymore, will I?" offered Lee wearily. "How soon before we go critical," he asked not at all wanting to really hear the response.

"Five days," was the solemn reply.

CHAPTER TWELVE

"Exiting plasma envelope," stated the mission computer (miscom) of my Transatmospheric vehicle. I was bathed by the pinkish glow given off by the Excelofrax microporous silicon thermal insulation blankets that protected the Tav's outer polycomposite/titanium skin from the plasma generated by moving through the atmosphere on auto pilot at faster than Mach 25. The highly classified active matrix canopy provided a virtual bubble from which the occupant could see in real time outside of one's craft. Because of the oppressive operating environment of Tavs, there are no glass windows on the craft. By eliminating windows, the structural integrity of the craft as well as the operational efficiency was substantially increased on the Advanced

Research Projects Administration (ARPA) Tavs. Instead, the pilot receives a virtual image corresponding to what one would see if they were to look outside of the craft by looking at a pseudo canopy. This bubble completely surrounded the pilot, and is covered with an advanced plasma display that displays real time, visible imagery, in three dimensions. Additionally, the canopy displays all pertinent vehicle parameters to the pilot and encompasses the entire avionics suite, giving a beneficial war fighting edge to the American Tavs over their Lea counterparts. Mission course tracking, IFF (Identify Friend or Foe) symbology, automatic threat detection, recognition, and generation of their flight profiles, offensive armaments, their courses, and their targets, all can be displayed on the screen with a single thought. All units are plotted on the screen in their real time positions, as derived from national technical means, Gips, on board Lidar, defensive warfare systems determinations, or from the various system computers (miscoms, atcoms, defcoms, etc.). Utilizing artificial intelligence, sensor fusing, data sharing with other Space Command assets in near real time, and a super conducting squid helmet capable of processing one's thoughts into actions, the advanced warfare suite incorporated into the Polar-Orbital Sciences-Loral 2034 "**Eagle**" is the most capable weapons platform in and above Earth's atmosphere. My craft is normally armed with a standard variety of offensive weapons, from four KKV's for air to air or exoatmospheric combat, to one dual capable offensive/defensive laser, capable of blinding optical seeking weapons of the enemy. For non standard missions, the Tav is capable of carrying 2,000 pound hypervelocity MHD missiles to disrupt enemy electronic equipment, PGMs that use Gips information to attack their targets from standoff range, or the silver bullet of tactical high priority, heavily defended, deep

underground target destruction, small sub nuclear (a slight misnomer, since a chain reaction creates the explosive effect) tipped EPWs (Earth Penetrating Warheads).

Defensively, my craft is normally outfitted with one towed decoy active in all UV, visible, IR, far IR, and radio frequencies, four deployable ballutes that mimic the size, shape, and electromagnetic signature of my craft. For orbital combat, a condensation augmentor, and various chaff and flare dispensers. Water generated by the combination of hydrogen and oxygen fuel cells is dumped by the condensation augmentor in the form of a mist that provides a defense against lasers, lidar, and other electro-optically guided kill vehicles.

The perfectly streamlined, waverider, lifting body shape, lacking a vertical tail, was designed from the outset to maintain a high degree of stealth and maneuverability at high altitude and beyond. Below 50,000 feet, there were better fighters, dedicated to atmospheric flight only, especially since the craft used engine vectoring for positive flight control more so than the small control surfaces utilized during hypersonic flight. The demands of transatmospheric flight required a light platform to support the weight of seven aerospike engines, as well as orbital maneuvering thrusters, a small manned canister, payloads of smallsats, and the super cryogenic slush fueled aerogel lithium tanks. In fact, advances in super lightweight aerogels, microporous silicon insulation, titanium metallic thermal protection, and the ever shrinking size and weight of avionics, made the multimission '39 "**Eagle**" Mark Fours, actually outperform the less capable, original, '34 Mark One "**Eagles**" that were manufactured only a few years ago. With the

ability to target any point on Earth in 90 minutes or less, the Tav is utilized as the proverbial silver bullet, or ace of aces.

As the incandescent glow faded, I was able to see the dark blue sky directly above me, for the first time since I moved to the moon. Further on the horizon, the blueness was whited out by cumulonimbus clouds. A blue line indicating my planned route penetrated the heart of the clouds ahead.

"Show weather," I instructed the cocom.

The canopy displayed the latest meteorological data as unlinked from the International Weather Service. I did not like what I saw. The symbology for ice crystals was displayed at altitude, a light rain was falling below 1500 meters, and lightning strike data was incorporated into the visual display.

"Show projected mission timeline plus twenty minutes," I ordered.

The visual changed perspective to that of where I was supposed to be twenty minutes later. It indicated that the planned route had me flying directly through the icy formations. I became concerned that the radar/lidar absorbing material sprayed onto my craft would become degraded because of contact with the ice crystals, and the resultant chemical reactions that will occur.

Cocom, what will the status be of the r-lam at T plus 30, I thought in a manner such that the squid correctly identified and understood the question.

R-lam effectiveness degraded 26%, replied the cocom directly into my thoughts.

Cocom, correlate reduced r-lam effectiveness with the atcom and miscom data, and assess the impact on mission success rate, I again ordered the cockpit computer's artificial intelligence.

Negative joy, was the cocom's analysis several seconds later.

No joy. Two of the worst feared words (well, that and abort, or even reset). No joy could mean several things, from system not responding to bad outcome of the mission, to terminal and catastrophic loss of the vehicle (and it's crew!). I gathered that the cocom indicated the mission will be non-successful, I thought.

Affirmative, replied the cocom.

Cocom, where does our mission fail? I asked.

Prior to weapons delivery, was it's stoic reply.

"Dammit!" I swore aloud. I had to make the target, at least. My brain quickly scanned through the various mission profiles included in the strike package in case something went wrong. There didn't seem to be a way to compensate for the reduced r-lam other than veering from the flight plan. But that presented many problems in and of itself. For one thing, the mission profile is designed to be effective due to supporting strikes by others and a concerted C3I effort prepared to deceive the enemy. Alter course, and the supporting aircraft might shoot you down, especially since the Tavs existence was on a need to know basis only. And Tavs never, ever, ever, break radio silence - to do so

betrays one position with enough accuracy that near certainly means death. No, there has to be a way to maintain the flight plan and deliver the package to its target.

Cocom, can the defcom attempt to compensate? I wondered.

The answer came faster than I wanted. Systems already compensated for to give 26% fail rate, it said.

Cocom, given all of the data, can you postulate any options or alternatives that will improve the mission success rate? I asked.

The clock symbol indicating the cocom was working on the problem was displayed for a disheartening long time. I longed for the simpler times, one hundred years earlier, back in the piston engine driven propeller age. Back then, anyone with a high school diploma, a little math skills, and some natural ability could fly an airplane. There were only a few tactics known for aerial combat, and even fewer for bombing missions. Simple specifications dictated the design of most aircraft - speed and power. Survival meant faster, more maneuverable, more rugged machines, and better training. Typical preflight briefs lasted only twenty minutes or so for a typical fighter sweep. All you needed to know was where am I, where am I going, who I am protecting, who the enemy is, how do I defeat him, and the route home. Now, in the middle of the twenty-first century, the cocom knew more of the mission than the pilots. There was simply too much data available to pilots in the form of imagery, threat detection and assessment and countermeasures, counter-countermeasures, and so on. A pilot had to know more than his historical counterpart, but the avionics warfare suite (AWS) had to know

everything. Still, there might be unimagined threats surface, so the developers at ESD (Electronic Systems Design (ESD) at Wright-Patterson Air Base in Dayton, Ohio, developed the AWS with artificial intelligence. The AI system can be programmed with an incredible amount of data, and was able to learn from each mission and adjust on its own a better profile able to meet the goal of target destruction with less chance of detection or enemy engagement. It was this ability to speculate and try different methodologies that I was counting on to preserve this mission. If not, I would have to scrub the sortie, for Space Command generally utilized Tavs only if the initial success rate is above 90%.

Just as I was about to question its health (i.e. did it lock up), it gave it's response.

Yes, it beamed to me its accomplishment.

Finally, I thought. Cocom, how?

On screen, in an area unobtrusive, the cocom displayed the previous flight profile and the newly created one. The text box presented textural equations and statistical derivatives from which I was able to discern that the key to my survival was to be - Chaos! By flying in a chaotic manner, the craft will be able to spoof the enemy tracking and solution algorithms programmed into their computers.

Satisfied in the cocom's ability to perform the task adequately, I placed the vehicle i the navcom's control. Immediately, the craft began to jink slowly and unpredictably. While this maneuvering would not halt the ability of the enemy to detect and acquire my craft,

the unpredictable nature of chaos should cause most of the missiles to miss, at least I hoped so anyway

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

"We have to put a stop to this now, before its too late!" said Louie LaSalle at the just convened emergency session of the top officers of the United Earth Foundation.

"I agree wholeheartedly," stated Al Severly. "The question is how. Ernst has said he's willing to see this thing to its conclusion," he continued.

"Yeah, to the conclusion of life on this planet," quipped Jari Talea sarcastically.

"We need to do something now to shake them all up, or we'll have nothing to unite afterwards," agreed Linda.

"I don't see how this can be stopped," said Al. "Both sides are in the process of striking the other in preemptive counter force strikes."

"I believe we can ride out your attack and succeed in ours against you," said rather matter of factly Igor Zhukov, the Lea liaison to the Foundation.

"Its talk like that that will insure this thing goes nuclear," noted Jari Talea, a survivor of the Pakistani strike on New Delhi in 2021.

"Maybe that's what needs to happen, now rather than later," suggested Louie.

No one could believe their ears at that comment.

"Why," asked Linda.

"Things are spiraling out of control already. I say we seize the initiative and put on a demonstration to both the G.U.S. and the Lea that they won't soon forget," said Louie.

"What are you saying?" asked Jarri.

"I'm saying, I think a little demonstration of resolve is in order by the Lea against Gus."

"Now hold on a minute," protested the GUS representative, Al Severly.

"Sit down, Al," ordered Louie commandingly. "Don't think that the usage of nuclear weapons in combat is restricted to only you. Its been 90 years since Hiroshima, and no one else has used atomic weapons in combat since then," he lectured. "I say we end the American monopoly, and have the Lea send one missile, only one Igor, to show just how serious this little skirmish in Central America is about to become."

"I like it," said Igor.

"Well, I don't," said Al. "What's the target?" he asked.

"I'm glad you asked that. I recently had a meeting with some of my ypsi-c subjects, and I promised them a safe haven, a place where they can live free of human pesticides and other murderous acts against them. But for that to happen, we'll have to create a zone free of humanity. The only way we can do that is if an area becomes contaminated with fallout, similar to what happened at Chernobyl," began Louie. "Insects are remarkably protected against radiation, so I think we can kill two birds with one stone, so to speak, if

we target a limited area on the west coast, say San Francisco, where all the perverts are, we can give these insects a natural, well, not natural, but anyway, a wildlife refuge of sorts in the abandoned city."

"The American people will not stand for it," said Al.

"No of course not, that's why its vitally important that Igor's friends announce it was an accidental launch only, and that its target is San Francisco. Given this warning, I'm sure American assets can intercept and take out the missile before any harm is done. This should scare both sides down to a more reserved level of conflict, possibly even ending it upon the realization that nuclear weapons are useless militarily because of the fallout problem making the area uninhabitable afterwards for decades, like the Bikini Atoll, nearly 100 years later, is still contaminated with radioactive Cesium."

"I don't think I can convince the President to ride out a nuclear attack," stated Al.

"Don't think, just do it! I may be an American, but for the greater good of humanity, I will take one punch to the stomach and be wise and strong enough to show that it didn't hurt me and that I don't need to respond in kind. We must get a hold of this situation before it goes insane. I've read your transcripts on what the President said Al, and I believe he may be the greatest danger to humanity there is, thinking he will go to counter force nuclear attacks in five days or so. Its insane to be thinking the nuclear genie can be corked once unleashed. Its the end of civilization that he's talking about, and if he didn't have such a bigger asshole for a Vice President, I'd have Ernst assassinated! No, I've given this a lot of thought, and I can only come to one conclusion - one demonstration of

resolve by the Lea and the world must back down from the nuclear precipice. For the sake of civilization as we know it, and for our ultimate goal to be reached! Why, I think afterwards, these two world powers may even realize how close to Armageddon we were and become closer than ever to working together to prevent any such occurrence in the future. And only by working together can we see our goal of unification become reality. I see in this plan I've developed, the opening stages of our goal."

Al sat there uncomfortably, shaking his head back and forth at the prospect of a nuclear weapon impacting an American city. The logistics would be a nightmare. It has been 80 years since mass evacuations from cities was practiced by the general populace. And the current plans put together by the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) for evacuations assumed a two day strategic warning of a nuclear attack. How was he supposed to evacuate the west coast given only thirty minutes warning? Or, should he exercise conventional wisdom and not warn any of the inhabitants? Might more lives be saved if the populace remained indoors, asleep and oblivious to their impending doom? And what of the orbital assets designed to protect against a nuclear attack? Al was one of the few people in the world who knew that the orbital system's 100% success rate at destroying incoming warheads high above the atmosphere was in actuality faked. The sense of security that those assets provided was a clever misinformation campaign to dissuade any rogue states from launching on the GUS. No, Al thought to himself, the orbital assets would be of no help. Only point defenses offered by the Navy's upper tier defensive missiles offered true hit to kill protection against incoming warheads. But that system was designed to protect against large scud like warheads, not the small, light, and very fast multiple advanced maneuvering

reentry vehicles (MAMARVs) associated with ballistic missiles. And who's to say that the attack will; come from land based missiles? Al briefly imagined the ultimate horror, that of a nuclear armed cruise missile attack from sea, only five minutes or so flight time to the target. Given the lack of construction of a Pave Paws radar site on the west coast, there would not even be detection of the cruise missile until it exploded in a huge fireball as it hit its target. Not even key personnel could be evacuated from the city in that compressed time frame. No, Al had to protect America the best he could. The only way he could do so is to give the orbital assets at least a try at taking out the incoming warhead. There may be more targets with a land based rocket to kill, but there was just no defense against a cruise missile attack.

"I'd like to clarify one thing," stated Al Severly.

"Yes, go ahead," offered the unifier.

"If I'm to understand this correctly, this is just to be a demonstration designed to scare us, correct?" he asked.

"Yes."

"In that case, can you make sure the attack comes from the strategic rocket forces only? At least give us a fighting chance to defend ourselves, we can't do anything to stop a cruise missile attack," stated Al.

"As I already directed, the launch is to be via land based missiles. However, the goal here is to succeed in scaring both sides away from the nuclear precipice. As such, at

least one of the warheads must reach its target and explode. And that target shall be the Naval Shipyard at San Francisco," demanded Louie. If it will help matters, I hereby direct that the other 20 MIRVs be decoys only. To observers in foreign countries, it will look as if your orbital assets took out 20 out of 21 missiles. Will that be of sufficient success of your 'brilliant pebbles'?" asked the unifier.

"Yes, thank you," agreed Al. Al was hoping for a 100 % success rate, but for some reason Louie wanted San Francisco destroyed. "Does the city have to be destroyed to shake us up? Why not give me 100% success? Surely the launch itself would be a wake up call of sorts. Why does San Francisco have to die?" he asked.

"Because I've made a deal with the insects. They are to obtain their own territory, free of humanity. The only way to do this is to create uninhabitable land for their use. I think one hydrogen bomb will create a large enough refuge for them for the foreseeable future."

"But can't the same thing be accomplished with just fallout? What if the one bomb was knocked off course just enough so that it becomes a water burst? The blast surge should coat the city with more fallout than Chernobyl. And no one has to die, well at least not right away," said Al.

"Hmm. Let me consider that for a few minutes," thought Louie. "I see your point Al, and I like it. It serves the purpose of shaking things up, with no immediate loss of life. Sure, there will be immediate effects from the fallout on the populace, but the fallout should force an evacuation of the area without actually killing anyone. And, the area will be so

contaminated from the water blast pressure wave inundating downtown that no one will be able to return there for decades. And it would be perfect for the insects - they have a high tolerance to radiation. Yes, I think that's a workable solution AI. Its agreed then, Igor, one SS-30 shot, in the heart of the bay area. In fact, I think we can take this one step further. Igor, I want you to load the decoys with a proximity fuse and inert nuclear warheads. When the brilliant pebbles moves to intercept, make it look like the other 20 warheads are real. When the intercept is called for, have them perform an airburst. That will spread nuclear materials across the entire west coast - from Washington to Mexico. It will further serve as a warning on the evils of nuclear warfare, as well as provide the insects with more territory. I'm sure we can come up with a genetic solution to the problem of immediate chromosome and cell damage to the residents, well, former residents, of the affected areas."

"How are we going to relocate up to 45 million people?" asked AI.

"I'll leave the logistics of that to you," deflected Louie.

"Thanks," said AI bitterly.

"Well, now that the course has been set, we have a meeting with destiny to attend to. Igor, launch your missile," ordered the unifier.

"Yes Sir," came the quick and professional reply.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Deep inside Cheyenne Mountain, Colorado, the Commander of the North American Air Defense (NORAD) Command glanced at the situation screen with anticipation. Soon, assets of the Larger EurAsian Union would be struck by independently operating tavs. On the screen was the real time feed from Gips of the Avignon Military Complex. All of the enemy tavs were now fully loaded and ready for flight. At the bottom of the screen was a countdown in progress, indicating probable time on target for our forces. The event counter was approaching zero. In a matter of seconds, the pride of the Lea, their sole tav squadron, will be destroyed, grinned the Commander. Not since the Persian Gulf war was a commander so sure of success as he.

"General!" interrupted a second lieutenant. "We have an emergency flash from NIMA," she said urgently.

"Put it on the screen," ordered the Commander.

Imagery from the next generation brilliant infra red search and track (BIRST) satellite was displayed in a window overlain on the previous imagery.

"We have confirmation of a single launch from Russia," she said excitedly.

On the screen, a brilliant missile plume could be seen rising from deep inside Siberia, trajectory towards the United States.

The Commander rose from his seat and walked briskly to the red phone connecting him with the national command authorities.

"Al Severly," said the General as he answered the red phone in an all knowing manner.

"General, we have confirmation of a launch at us from inside Russia," he stated hurriedly.

"Can you confirm it's target," asked the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff.

The Commander inside Cheyenne Mountain glanced at his second in command.

"What's the target Marant," he asked.

"Space Command predicts somewhere on the west coast. They'll know more when the booster separates and the Mamarvs are released.

"General, we have a confirmed location somewhere on the west coast, uncertain as to exact locale until Mamarv breakout," he said quickly.

"Can we engage them with brilliant pebbles?" asked Al.

"We'll try. I'll hand off to Space Command at Falcon (Colorado) "

"Good. I'll get in touch with the President and get back to you," stated Al.

"We only have twenty-five minutes until they reach our air space General," said the Commander of NORAD.

"Thanks Ben. I'll call back in three minutes," said Al as he picked up his red phone direct link to the President.

The President was in the Oval Office when his secure line rang.

"Ernst here," he said Sleepishly.

"Sir, we have a launch against us from inside Russia," came the excited voice of Al Severly.

"What!" When? Where?" asked the President.

"Four minutes ago, Birst detected a single launch, its trajectory has been confirmed as headed towards the west coast. We don't yet know the exact destination given the maneuvering capability of the Mamarvs, but we'll know in about ten minutes," said the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff.

"Are there any more launches?" he asked frightened of the thought.

"Negative, Sir, only one," came the solemn reply.

Just then the direct link from Moscow rang.

"Hold on a minute Al, the Lea has just called. I'll put it through on conference call," said Ernst Gilbert.

The face of the Premier of Russia greeted the President of the Greater United States.

The Premier spoke first. "Mr. President, I regret to inform you that a grave disaster has happened," he stated.

"I'd say so, if you mean you started World War Three," quipped the President.

"Mr. President, I don't know how to tell you this, but the launch you by now have detected was an unauthorized launch."

"Unauthorized? You mean it was a mistake?" asked Ernst disbelieving.

"Yes Mr. President. That launch is by no means to be construed as an actual representation of our government view of the situation at hand. I assume you can intercept and destroy the Mamarvs before they hit their target?" asked the Premier.

"We will try," answered the President.

"Our information is that the targets are along the west coast," he admitted.

"Yes, we have figured that much out," stated Ernst.

"Believe me, I am deeply sorry this event has happened with our tensions running so high between our two countries. I would understand your retaliation in kind against, say, our East coast facilities, should you fail to intercept the missile," offered the Premier.

"I'll keep that in mind, Dimitri," acknowledged Ernst.

"As further proof of the accidental nature of this danger, I am willing to offer a cease fire for 24 hours as we reassess our objectives with regard to the conflict in the Central American States," offered Dimitri.

"I'd be willing to do the same if we neutralize your threat to the west coast," stated the President.

"Mr. President," interrupted Al. "But did you forget PD82?" he asked.

"Ah, yes, your pre-emptive strike against us," interceded Dimitri.

"You know of this?" asked Ernst.

"But of course we were informed almost immediately of your plans," stated the Premier.

"Then you realize that there is no way I can prevent their carrying out the attack - there just isn't time," confessed the President.

"We are aware of that, and have given careful consideration to riding out the attack and instituting a cease fire should you also ride out this mistaken launch of an SS-30 missile (developed by the Nadiradze design bureau) by one of our strategic rocket forces."

The President considered this for a moment. Damn convenient of them to launch a missile at us only minutes before we were to strike their entire C3I structure (with the exception of the Premier himself), he thought. Still, the absolute priority lie with getting the missile destroyed. "I will consider your offer. But for now, we have a missile to

intercept," he stated, as he nodded an affirmative to AI who was part of the conference call.

"Again, let me express my deep regrets to you and your people regarding this unfortunate accident," Dimitri said diplomatically to the President.

"I'll get back to you after a successful intercept," said the President grimly.

Turning towards his visa phone, an exasperated President looked at AI's face on the screen.

"AI, can we get the ABL (Airborne Laser, designed to destroy incoming Mamarvs with a three to five second laser shot) up and running in time?" he asked unsure of the answer.

"No Sir, we need several hours to fill its cryogenic tanks with reactant for the laser. I'm afraid we'll have to rely on brilliant pebbles and the Navy's Upper Tier Weapons System," he confessed sadly.

"Then inform Millie that we'll want to respond in kind should those warheads hit their targets," ordered the President.

"Sir, if I may object," began the Chairman, "the Premier's apologized for the accidental launch and is offering a cease fire in the south should we ride this out."

"I think it's mighty coincidental that they should have an accidental launch just minutes before they were to lose their capacity to launch any missiles at all at us," quipped President Ernst Gilbert.

"Sir, I think Lee (the Secretary of Defense) would agree with me that we should take this punch and accept their offer," defended Al. "We must step back from the precipice and be the better man, so to speak, like the Israeli's were during the Gulf War or 1991," he countered.

"And how would I be re-elected? Would you vote for the only leader in American History to allow American soil be attacked without retaliating? I should say not. As your Commander-in-Chief, I order you to prepare Millie for a counter-strike," commanded the President.

Al could not believe his ears. This was exactly the kind of talk that was supposed to be prevented by the missile launch. Instead, we have a cowboy President whom wants to fight back instead of being the bigger, better, man. Those brilliant pebbles had better work, he thought to himself, or the whole world will be engulfed in flames from this man, no, this madman, from across which he sat.

CHAPTER 15

The atcom announced it was nearly time for me to release my weapons at the target. I was over 70 kilometers from the defense site, well within range of my two EPWs. As the seconds reached zero hour, my finger tensed on the commit button. Once launched, there would be no turning back, the missiles will fly its own pre-designated route to the target and explode deep inside the heart of the mountain, destroying the Lea's only ground based laser defensive system as well as the particle accelerator. At precisely the correct time, I depressed the firing button and sent the two missiles on the

way. In a matter of minutes, the entire C3I structure of the LEA will be destroyed, in addition to their only **Firedart** squadron, sitting on the runway awaiting takeoff. Little did I or my compatriots know of the nuclear attack on the GUS by the LEA. For us, it was a routine mission, guaranteed at success. I and the rest of the squadron headed back to the orbital base, aware of the surety that all of our targets will be hit as verified by orbital Gips coverage.

Ours would be the last shot in this ugly minor war turned major over the future of Central America. The LEA recognized the interests of the GUS in Central America and acquiesced their sphere of influence in the region. The brilliant pebbles missed their targets entirely, leaving the Navy's missiles to intercept and destroy the incoming warheads. As was directed by Louie, twenty of the missiles exploded in an airburst over the states of Oregon and Washington. The radioactive fallout from the blasts left much of the west coast uninhabitable, for several decades to come. Well, uninhabitable to all but the insects, who warmly received their promised territory by the Unifier. It was later agreed that all nuclear weapons be abolished and destroyed, as the consequences of their usage to the environment and the civilian populations living in the affected are was too great a price for any nation to pay. Thus, not only was the war over with a flash, the era of nuclear weapons had come to a close. From now on, only conventional weapons would be used in combat by military personnel.

EPILOGUE

Linda lay on the couch next to me, as I gently caressed her soft, warm body. As I tenderly ran my hand and fingers up her long beautifully smooth legs, to her thigh, across her spot, and up to circulate around her breasts, I looked back at last month's war with deep reflection. The time I spent in orbit, unsure of whether I would be rescued deeply affected me. The love Linda and I shared took on greater importance in my life. I did not want to be without her, or ever lose her for whatever reason. I had promised myself I would ask her to marry me when I was rescued. Now that we are together in an intimate fashion, I felt the time is right. I grasped the ring from my left index finger I always wore when with her, and placed it on her ring finger, giving her hand a squeeze afterwards and a wet kiss on her cheek. We laid together, holding each other's warm, moist hands, as our hearts beat faster with anticipation as I continued to kiss her cheeks. I blew gently into her ear, at the same time I began rubbing her breast with my hand firmly. As I did so, her breathing increased dramatically, and she tilted her head towards me and kissed me passionately on the lips. I again blew in her ear ever so softly, at the same time my right hand reached down and caressed her warm, moist spot. The sensations of chills down her spine were too much for her. She lifted me off the couch and threw me to the floor aggressively, to lay atop me. I reached down and unbuttoned her pants as she unzipped mine. We rolled them down, panting wantonly after each other, in animalistic passion. She grabbed my cock and shoved it inside her warm, and very moist depository.

"Will you marry me?" I asked, excited by her movements atop me.

"You know I can't," She confessed sadly. "I don't want to lose my son," she said knowing she'd lose him if her husband ever found out about her adultery.

I began to cry.....

PART II

I was devastated. For years I flourished as a Star Pilot, while still maintaining my association with the founder of the United Earth Foundation (UEF), Louie LaSalle. But my association with Linda was unfortunately no more.

From 2047-2049, the war of unification was fought. I played a pivotal role in bringing about the unity of humankind into one global organization. I was a general, and a space command hero. During those two years, I saw much combat, which further hardened my mood. With Linda gone and no hope of finding anyone else. I threw myself into my work. Somehow, during the fight to bring the Greater United States into the UEF, I met Cheryl Lee, whom I was happy enough with to become her husband. We moved to Mars, and had a child, Joseph.

CHAPTER ONE

I awoke June 16, 2052, as I did on any other day, at 0900. I did not have to report to work at the L. W. C. A. (Lunar Weather Controlling Administration), until two hours later. Getting the news tapes, I inserted the latest edition of them into my deskcom and proceeded to read them. I hadn't gotten far, when I recognized the face of my old friend, Lee Roalnvoo, on the second page. I zoomed in on the accompanying story and found, to my surprise, that he was to be tried for war crimes he committed during the war of '50. According to the article, a few insects and the old government of Mexico were bringing charges against him. The charges relate to his role at the N. S. A. (National Security Agency) acting as General Walthers, as opposed to his real identity or his other covers.

The trial was scheduled to begin today at 1600 in the Earth Jurisdiction Orbital Court (Ejoc). After reading the article, I leaned back in the chair and wondered why Lee had not told me of this. Maybe he just didn't want to get me involved. After all, I had done my share of misdoings during the war. Then a novel thought struck me. What if I went down to the Ejoc and gave him some moral support? I called my boss via the deskcom and told him I was not coming in today because I had a court appearance. He accepted my excuse, so I gathered my pocom (pocket computer) and called my TAV (Transatmospheric vehicle) to me. When I walked out the door, my speedster was already there, waiting for me. I climbed in, and harnessed myself securely.

After inserting the proper coordinates into the navcom, I rocketed from my lunar home, on my way to Earth orbit.

After a six hour flight, I arrived at the station and docked with one of the hanger modules. After egressing from my craft, I put on a pair of no-floaters, to keep me on the ground so to speak. Being somewhat lost, I walked to the nearest modem and plugged my pocom into it. After a few seconds, I accessed the trial location and had the display show me the best route.

Minutes later, I arrived in a room packed with reporters. It was obvious the trial was already in progress. I stood near the rear of the room and gave the place the "once over".

In the other side of the room, a large black podium stood oppressively. It hid most of the man behind it effectively. The man had gray hair partly covered by a hat and parted over his left eye. His eyes were a pale blue, and he looked vaguely familiar. He was about two meters tall and appeared to be very muscular. He had a few hour's stubble on his prematurely wrinkled face. They say alcohol gives one that appearance after a while. The thought of a drunken judge presiding over my friend was a distressing one. I decided to listen to what the judge had to say.

The judge gave a brief description of the events that occurred during the war and then asked for his first witness. A spider named Merri scampered along a thin web from his place in the corner of the room to the stand. The arachnid reoriented itself to speak into a compulator. I listened with great interest, as I had never heard of the war from the insect's perspective.

"There had been many changes between the last two wars humans and us fought," it began. "Eventually Herman died, and there was a great struggle amongst ourselves as we strived to proclaim a new imperial leader. After the fight, which lasted for two generations, Loak the Locust emerged victorious. He immediately began to consolidate his power. Unfortunately, Loak was 13 generations old, an unheard of age. His reign lasted only two seasons."

"During the melee for the seat that followed, in a small territory near where humans once lived, a change which took six generations to be noticed occurred. At first, only newly hatched ants and other ground roving insects were affected. An extra eye here, missing antennae there, were the first indications that something was different in 'Frisco. At first we thought the mutations were a result of just how bizarre humanity had gotten in 'Frisco before the first war. We now know about the war humanity fought with itself in 2041, and how Insective bore the brunt of the human suns. Regardless of the cause, about one season before Loak was installed as leader, a strange mutation occurred. In one hatchery of the Green's nest, a newly hatched wasp emerged from it's egg so profoundly different that they knew it was destined to change how all insects would live - for a thousand generations or more."

"The Greens named it Louther. Louther was a wasp and had streamlined wings and a heavily armored exoskeleton. Apart from the few physical differences, there were hidden changes that took three generations to manifest themselves. Louther developed an uncanny ability to sway the populace to his side of an argument. By the time Louther was nine generations old, Loak died, and another battle for the seat began. Louther

won, and he quickly formed a platform determined to continue the first war against you humans," it explained.

"Why would Louther want to continue a war against humanity when you finally received your own territory free of humans in 2041?" asked the judge.

"That is why he wanted to attack. Herman was out of touch with the whims of the populace. There was no sentiment equal to what Herman felt, at least as far as stopping the war was concerned. Most of the population was glad when Herman died, because he believed in only limited wars with limited goals. He was too much of an insectarian. Of course Herman and Loak were ineffectual because they did not want to violate the controls you humans placed on us which were unjust and stif..." he was cut off.

"The controls that Merri is referring to," interrupted Lee, "were negotiated between Herman and then President Ernst Gilbert, of the U.S.A. Both agreed to normalize relations and moved to work out their differences to ensure a lasting peace. One of the controls was that the insects were not allowed to form into large groups. Also, the U.S. was to be informed in advance of the time, place, and context of any assemblies. In exchange for adhering to these protocol, the insects were given Califington, the pieces blown off the continental U.S. by the Russians during the war of '41."

"You forgot to mention one," corrected Merri. "You know, where the leader of Insecthive was not allowed to make any decisions concerning internal affairs without first consulting the President of the U. S. That was the most disliked of all the controls.

When Herman and Loak were no longer in control of the imperial seat, Louthier took over and brought the populace back to their feet with blood stirring speeches and the like. He put the word 'pride' back into the lexicon of Insecthive. He told us that we had been wronged by the treaty, and that we should continue the war against humanity. After all, we had just won a major victory -the proclamation of Insecthive as a Mammalian-free territory."

"That'll be all for now, Merri. You may go back to your web," spoke the judge.

Merri crawled along the edge of the table, attached a piece of webbing, and sailed across the room, blown by convective currents.

"We will now call to the witness stand Glen Walthers, the accused. He was the former Ambassador from the United States to Insecthive. Swear him in bailiff," ordered the judge.

Lee approached the witness stand. He was an aging man, approximately 42 years old. His graying hair was parted to cover his baldness, to little effect. He looked clean shaven, and his skin was of a healthy color. On his 1.9 meter frame, he wore his military dress uniform proudly.

"Do you swear on Gyatia to tell the truth, so help you cosmically?" asked the bailiff.

"I do," was the reply.

"Mr. Walthers, please tell this court about your role as Ambassador, and explain why you failed to stop what eventually occurred."

"Well, it was a Tuesday or Thursday, of February 23, 2042, when I was approached by President Gilbert. He asked me if I would take the job of Ambassador from the U.S. to Insecthive. At the time, I was working for the National Security Agency as a prog. This tied in with what President Gilbert wanted me to do as Ambassador. He wanted someone with intelligence experience to spearhead a new campaign against Insecthive. I was to use a compulator in order to 'decode' and put into Amerish the transmissions communicated to the populace of Insecthive by first Loak, and later Louther. Once decoded, I was to send them to Washington, where they were processed and assessed. Once interpreted, I was then given orders as what to do."

"The first sign I had of anything going on was in 2047. On March 29th of that year, Louther made a stirring speech inciting the population of Insecthive to take arms and move into the neutral and barren Nevadan Wasteland. By April 3, 2047, the land was proclaimed as a protectorate of Insecthive. Many insects moved into the newly acquired lebensraum. I was instructed by Washington to tell Louther that we were unhappy with this development, but as I'm sure Louther expected, the U. S. would do nothing. In actuality, the U. S. did react, with the initiation of project Annihilation against them. From September 2047 until June 2050, I headed the project."

"Project Annihilation was an N. S. A. sponsored anti-government project designed to overthrow and then extinguish Louther and his minions. We successfully recruited thousands of insects, mostly caterpillars. However, they were already under suspicion by Louther and the M. V. - their 'police', and all 'cats' were deported. The refugees were

set up in 'importation' camps in Arizona, until their 'rescue' by the advancing insects in mid 2050."

"With the disbandment of the M.V. and the installation of the hard-line M.M., Insecthive had become a military state by February 2050. Then, on June 17, 2050, I intercepted a communiqué from Louther to his military leaders. I relayed to Washington news of the impending attack and received a disturbing reply..."

Lee was nervously smoking a cigar when his deskcom announced an incoming priority message for him.

"Hello," Lee said as he recognized my face on the screen.

"I've got some distressing news for you Walthers."

"Give it to me straight, General," he said tired.

"Well, you know those messages you sent me earlier today," I led.

"Yeah."

"Well, they have been considered, and we in Washington feel we 'officially' never saw them."

"What?!"

"Wait! We can't have another Zimbabwe fiasco like '34. We need another Pearl Harbor."

"You mean we have to wait until we're attacked?" he asked.

"Right. Ever since Zimbabwe, we don't feel we can attack first. We need another Pearl Harbor, or better yet a Miami. Is that understood?"

"Yes."

"Good. Let us know when it starts."

"Yes Sir."

"Joeles out."

"Walthers clear," Lee said as the screen went blank. He went to the kitchen and poured himself a drink. When will it start? he wondered. How many people will have to die for a 'just' cause? A few thousand like at Pearl Harbor? Or 15,000 like the Miami race riots? Now would be a good time to drink, he thought. In a while he would be so drunk that he will not remember this night. At least that is what he hoped.

Lee was awakened by the incessant calling of his deskcom. A priority one call from a field commander in Nevada was active. Lee answered the request sleepishly.

"Yeah, General Walthers. What?"

"This is Captain Alexander. What the hells going on?" he queried.

"Going on? What's going on Alexanders?"

"Its Alexander, and you know damn well what's going on. I've been sending you reports of insect movements along the border for days. I've just received word from my F.O. that they are advancing."

"I want to talk to him," commanded Lee.

"I'll see what I can do," Alexander said as he tried to patch a three way satellite call.

Now what, wondered Lee. Does he continue this charade, or does he put a stop to it now, before anything becomes of it. Everyone knew the government was in trouble. With the spacelings wanting independence, the economy in recession, and now the insects on the move, the government probably will be impeached. If the government found a cause to rally the public, it might survive until the elections. Could that be their reasoning behind allowing the insects to attack? Lee knew that if truly desired, they could eradicate all of the insects in days. But where would that leave the government which he is sworn to protect? He decided one last time to try to get a response, as he called me.

"It's 0230 in the bloody A.M.! What the hell?" I raged.

"It's begun," Lee said ignoring the formalities.

"Where?"

"Eastern Nevada."

"Good," was the only reply.

"What do I do?"

"Like I've said, nothing."

"Why?" he asked knowing he was overstepping his bounds.

"Because it is in the best interest of this government not to," I offered.

Lee's deskcom informed him that contact was established with the forward observer in Nevada. "General, I've been informed that I can now communicate directly with the F.O."

"O.K. Walthers, tell him to stay where he is and to report all that he can about the insects,"

I ordered.

"Yes Sir." Lee made the connection with the forward observer. On the screen was displayed the corporal, who saluted Lee nervously.

"As you were," directed Lee.

The corporal immediately took up the position of parade rest. "Tell me what's going on son," ordered Lee.

"This place is crawling with bugs, Sir," came the scared reply.

"How many bugs have you observed?"

"There must be billions and billions of them, Sir."

Lee had visions of Carl Sagan saying those few words. He let out a laugh, which made his head hurt. "Seriously, how many are there?"

"More than I care to count, Sir."

"O.K., then can you tell me what kinds of 'bugs' there are?"

"All kinds-you name it, its here," came the reply.

Suddenly, there was a buzzing that descended upon and over the corporal's voice. Lee could see the forward observer's mouth move, but he could not hear what he was saying. Lee instructed his deskcom to squelch out the noise and to do a contrast stretch of the audio frequencies in the hope that the forward observer's voice could be gleaned from behind the veil of incessant insect noise. The deskcom attempted to compensate, but even fully stretched, the computer could not locate the voice. Lee did not want to watch what he thought was about to occur, but he did anyway.

The scene on the screen suddenly showed a rapid downward motion. Lee could no longer see the corporal's face. He saw the ground rush at him, and after hearing a loud thud, saw the horizon and part of the corporal's body. Within seconds, arachnids were swarming all over the telecommunicator and carried it in an easterly direction. Lee continued to watch with mild fascination. Millions and millions of insects passed the T.C. at a high rate of speed. What an intelligence bonanza, he thought. In the distance, Lee could see a figure shaped vaguely like a man running meanderingly. A gigantic brown cloud of living activity surrounded the wildly waving figure. Slowly, the figure ran out of the view of the camera. After approximately one hour of watching the scene as the T.C. was carried east, Lee saw a figure of a man in the distance. As the distance to the body decreased, Lee could see, albeit somewhat dizzily, the figure with much greater detail. It was the corporal, and he was not in good shape. As the T.C. was carried past the body, Lee caught a fleeting glimpse of the body being slowly digested by maggots from within and other insects from without. Lee felt terribly sick. He ran to the bathroom, where he promptly threw up.

How terribly disgusting, he thought. He certainly did not want to remember seeing this. He instructed his deskcom to hold all future calls until further notice. Then he set about trying to forget about what he just saw. There are two ways of forgetting things one does not want to remember - one easy, and one hard. He took the easy way out, and asked his housebot to get him some tranatrophics. The robot complied, and Lee popped them in his mouth. He soon passed out.

CHAPTER TWO

Lee awakened from his daze to find himself seated in a body chair and having a spotlight rudely trained upon him. He could vaguely spot figures in the darkness beyond. Then he realized he had been dreaming about the reply he received, and reality quickly set in.

"Mr. Walthers."

"Huh?"

"Will you please continue your testimony," ordered the Judge.

"Umm, where did I leave off?" asked Lee bewildered.

"You left off with the 'strange' reply you received from Washington."

"Basically, all I remember is that I have a very disgusting feeling about the reply. I can't remember the exact details, but I do know I wasn't pleased with the reply at all, *so much* so," he continued, "that I immediately took some drugs to forget the course of events that night!"

"This court does not appreciate daydreaming during testimony, ***nor*** does it appreciate confessions' of illicit activities on your behalf while wearing the uniform of an ***officer*** of the Armed Forces!" scolded the Judge. "Now answer the bloody question!"

"Look!" slammed Lee's fist on the chair. "I told you all that I remember!"

"Then a lie detector test would benefit you, would it not?" the Judge turned the question around.

"And if I don't take it?"

"Then the jury will be instructed to treat your testimony as suspect, and your outcome will be adversely affected."

"Can you give me something for the pain?" asked Lee woefully aware of the seriousness of the predicament he is in.

"No, after all, pain is an integral part of the lie test."

"Then can I have an electrophysician stand by in case 'it' happens?"

"Yes. This court will take a five minute recess while preparations are made for the test."

The spotlights were turned off and the general lighting was turned on. I blinked my eyes several times before they adjusted themselves to the increase of light. Around me, members of the press were busily comparing notes and wagering bets on whether Lee will survive or not.

Two men and a woman wheeled a large machine into the room and positioned it next to Lee. The woman motioned for Lee to sit in the often deadly chair. After he did so, the woman gingerly connected various sensors over parts of Lee's body. Satisfied her job

was complete, she left the room through a side doorway and set up some equipment inside an adjoining room. When she was ready, the general lights were turned off and the spotlight was once again trained on it's victim.

"All rise. This court is again in session. His honorable Judge Hopkins presiding," announced the bailiff.

After we rose, we were told to be seated and we obediently obliged. I began to wonder about the name Hopkins-I had never heard of it before. I worried about what kind of judge this person was: was he a "hanging" judge, or a fair and truly honorable one. I listened with interest to the remainder of the trial.

"For the benefit of the defendant, I will explain the workings of the lie detector. The lie detector determines whether a person is truthful or not. By measuring the electromagnetic pattern given from one's brain, it is possible to construct visual and auditory representations of the person's thoughts. Whenever the computed algorithms do not match what the persons is telling us, a mild shock is introduced to the lying individual. Then the original question is asked again, giving the victim a chance to rectify their testimony. In the event of further attempts at cover-up, a stronger and stronger amperage is applied to the individual, until either the truth is obtained...or the person expires," explained the judge passionately.

It was evident to me that the last part of the statement was added for psychological effect, and judging from Lee's cringing reaction, it was evident to him as well.

"My name is Susan Engleman. I will be administering this test. I am ready whenever you are Mr. Walthers," announced and prodded a feminine voice over the public address system.

"Let's get this over with," he expelled.

"O.K., we'll start easy. Is your name Glen Walthers?"

"Yes, it is," came Lee's reply. At this point, apparently the court did not know Lee's true identity. He was taking a big gamble, hiding that fact so early in the game. There was a pause in the questioning, then Lee felt a mild tingling sensation throughout his body.

"Is your name Glen Penard Walthers," the question was asked in a more thorough manner.

Lee squirmed a little in his chair before answering. "Yes."

This time, the shock was much stronger than the first, and Lee's body jerked in the chair.

The question was asked again, with the Lee giving the same response. Again, his body was shocked by the increasing power surging through his body. Lee became hysterical and started

shouting obscenities at no one in particular. Susan came out of the room and applied a skin patch to his neck. Lee immediately calmed down, and his pupils dilated. He was sedated.

"Mr. Walthers, if that is your name, tell us your true identity, including name, rank, and security number," commanded Ms. Engleman.

A long time went by before Lee answered weakly. "Glen Penard Walthers; General-retired, 2-232-654-0202," he announced.

A loud sigh emanated from Susan, then about fifteen seconds later the spotlight dimmed and Lee's body convulsed violently. His body motionless, he appeared dead. The spotlight was turned off and the general lights turned on. The judge called for recess until tomorrow. The press left, and I walked over to where Lee was being helped onto an Amtrans by Susan.

As I approached the stand, Ms. Engleman turned and eyed me suspiciously.

"How's he going to be?" I asked.

"I've arranged for him to be taken to Elysium. There he'll be revived and his 'true identity' returned to him."

"What do you mean, his true identity will be returned?" I asked.

"When a person dies, their brain begins to decompose. The first things that go are the trivial memories, things like current events, favorite likes, dislikes, and any information which is inconsistent with what the deeper consciousness knows is not true. With revival, a form of amnesia is present for the first couple of days immediately after rebirth. During this time, the brain networks are in a near virgin state, and anyone can obtain true data from an individual's thoughts. Within a few days, the networking

becomes changed to the paths which the individual sees fit-including those that construct lies," she explained.

I found myself staring into her eyes, not really listening to what she was saying. She was quite ravishing in her red dress. She had brown-blond highlighted hair feathered back with a ribbon interwoven between the strands of hair. She had a sparkling diamond earring on her left ear, and judging from the size of it, it must have been made in orbit. On her eyelids she had applied blue mascara, which highlighted her crystal blue eyes and her deep blue eyelash liner. Her white skin was dosed with a touch of blush. She was very beautiful *and* she was not wearing a ring.

"Is something wrong?" she asked.

"Huh?" I said reactingly as I came out of my self-induced daze.

"I asked whether something was wrong. I don't appreciate people staring at me," she said scoldingly.

"No, nothings wrong," I brushed off her offense. "When did you say Glen will be revived?"

"You mean you still think it's his name?" she was surprised at the admission of my beliefs.

"Yes, he's in a very complicated situation. I know because I served with him," I volunteered.

"You did? I'd like to hear more about him, if that's possible," she asked.

"Sure," I gleamed, then I caught myself and looked less happy. I didn't want to appear over anxious to be with Susan. "How about some coffee at say, Polly's Orbital Diner?" I invited.

"O.K., but I have to drop off Walthers or whoever he is first. See you at '8?" she offered.

"Sure," I agreed. "By the way, my name's Paul Jaffrin," I said as I extended my hand to shake.

CHAPTER FIVE

Comment [SW1]: Page: 29

Seventeen minutes later, I was on final approach to Libra station. Libra station was an assortment of thirty nine different work modules clustered around eight central living modules. On each of the main X, Y, and Z axis was a docking module, and flanking the

modules were three very large solar arrays. Libra was, of course, in a geosynchronous orbit at one of the natural resonance points in the Earth-Moon system.

I docked with module DM-3 and carried out post docking procedures normally. I entered the module and was greeted by a happy Linda Reynolds.

"Hi Paul, you ready for the big meeting this afternoon?"

"Yep, I sure am looking forward to meeting the 'Unifier'."

"All of us third through six class personnel are. Previously, only personnel with a rating of one or two could have an audience with him. He's taking a big risk, showing his face to so many people."

"I guess that means we're close to achieving our goal," I speculated.

"We shall see."

"That we shall," I said as I followed her lead through the various corridors.

After fifteen minutes of a rather ungainly performance on my part, we arrived at the central briefing room to find a dozen or so "underlings" mingling about. All of them were occupied, and we decided to mingle. Linda took my arm and led me to the nearest gathering. They were discussing economics when we arrived. The small group consisted of two rather tall men and a shortly woman. The tall black man looked vaguely familiar. Linda unhooked our arms, and outstretched hers to introduce us to the trio.

"Hi, I'm Linda Reynolds. This is Paul Jaffrin," she said pointing towards me.

The tall black man vigorously shook both our hands and introduced himself and the rest of the group. "My name is Dexter Semptat. On my right is Andrei Igolhov, and my left is Helen

Goring."

"I bet you three are economists," I guessed.

"We are," Helen answered, pointing to herself and Igolhov. "Dexter's a diplomat from central Africa. He's upset because he just found out about the embargo."

"Embargo? What embargo," asked Linda.

"You didn't hear? That's why 'the Unifier' called this meeting. By the way, what do you two do," asked Helen as she eyed us suspiciously.

"I'm with world outlook, section overview, subsection oversayer, third class," answered Linda proudly.

"I'm with world outlook, section under controller, subsections of weather, diplomacy, military, quantum thinking, and special, fourth class," I also answered proudly.

"Quantum thinking, huh? You must be in someone's government," guessed Helen.

"Which one?"

"The good old U. S. of A.," I answered.

"All green personnel report to the Common Room in seven minutes," interrupted a voice over the intercom system.

Linda and I left the trio and headed for the meeting. Upon our arrival, we were greeted by the customary security checks, and then we took our seats. A few minutes went by before any official type stuff happened. Then a man walked onto the platform before us and made an announcement.

"You have two minutes until the start of the Fourth World Congress. Anyone who arrives after three minutes from now will be denied entrance. Thank you." The man stepped off the platform and waited patiently in the corner. Then, after two minutes, he rose and made his way to the platform again. "This meeting is now in session," he proclaimed. "I have the great pleasure of introducing to you 'the Unifier!'" and with that, all eyes turned towards the opening curtain...

The door opened and out stepped a young man. He walked to the platform and stood at the podium. He had darkish brown hair parted on the right; a close cropped mustache, blue eyes; was of medium build, displaying Russian facial features, and big strong hands. He was wearing a disposable yellow shirt under a brown coat. He lay on the table a small briefcase and his acom. He gave the room a steady, sweeping glance, and then began his prepared speech.

"Friends," he began. "I have called this meeting today because I feel we are on the verge of winning our cause. This morning, at 1245 SET, I received a message from

President Burton of the United States of America. In this letter, the President proceeded to explain to me the simple facts of the world today as he saw them. After doing this he gave me a brief history of U. S. space exploration since the late 1950's. He tried to make me feel guilty, I guess, of turning our backs on the nation responsible for placing us in orbit. Then he continued to explain the great economic benefits derived from the trade between the Earth and space. He said he regrets having to take the actions he was now being forced to undertake, but pressure from the E. E. C. left him with no choice. Shortly thereafter, the E. E. C., acting in concert with the United States of America, enacted a total embargo upon us. Upon receiving confirmation that the Independent Russian States were about to do the same, we were forced to act. I, along with the members of the economic and military members of the cabinet, have decided to publicly announce a total embargo on Earth as a whole."

There were cries of disagreement everywhere. "What right do you have to declare a total embargo?" shouted a woman.

"Yeah, who elected you dictator?" screamed another.

"The Unifier" calmed things down by raising his arms in the usual manner. "It is clear that some of you are unsatisfied with my decision." There was general agreement with that statement. "Then I suggest that we hold a caucus right now to elect a successor!" he gambled. The grumbling ceased. I and nearly everyone present was shocked. Was "the Unifier" actually contemplating resignation, or was it all just a tactical bluff?

"Perhaps if I explain our thinking on the subject, you will understand why I chose this course of action?" he queried. We all concurred.

"We've been throwing around the idea of a total embargo for the past eight weeks. Our original intent was to use it only when we were about to make our final break. The U. S., the European Economic Community, and the Independent Russian States had, or were about to, take our 'ace in the hole' from us. We could not let that happen. I immediately convened the economic and political cabinets, and thought of some ways of dealing with this action. One option was to do nothing. This was quickly rejected because of the inherent defeat we would face in world public opinion. Next, we looked at the other extreme. To secede from Earth and to declare war on it this soon seemed too risky, and that proposal was also tabled. Finally, the total embargo seemed to us to be the only choice we had. Now let me explain what the ultimate goal of our action is to be."

The man reached for a glass of water, sipped it slowly, and continued his prepared speech.

"As you know, SFInFE stands for the independence of spacelings from Earth. But what many of you may not be aware of is SFInFE's ultimate goal. That goal is far removed from the stated position of our charter, and yet I am confident that you whom I have chosen to represent us will be in total agreement with the council and I on this."

"But first, let me present some pertinent facts, as I see them. First, the world population is adding 500,000 more people than are dying each day. Secondly, our precious raw

materials on Earth are becoming economically unrecoverable. Thirdly, the great economies of the world's nations are stagnate or on the decline. The world standard of living has overall not increased, rather it has decreased. And finally, the great bread baskets of the world are ravaged by desertification. The great experiment of the wealthy nations bringing the poor nations to a higher level has failed. In fact, the opposite has happened, and at a synergistic effect at that. All this aid that the big four economies gave to the third world was just dust in the wind. It fostered an even larger population explosion, creating even greater demands on the economies, resources, and environments of the third world nations. At the same time, it dried up the surpluses of the big four nations (the United States of America, Japan, Russia, and Germany). Without the extra capital, those nations' standard of living has dropped dramatically. Education, wages, employment, and opportunity have dropped, while poverty, mortality rates, crime, birth rates and illegal immigration has risen. In America, the decaying, neglected, and overburdened cities are on the verge of forming separate city-states along ethnic lines. Indeed, the United States, once the preeminent world superpower, is but a shadow of it's former self now. All across the world, tensions are mounting as we near the middle of the twenty-first century. The core group and I have identified the single most pressing, literally and figuratively, problem facing humanity today - and that is overpopulation."

Murmurs of agreement met his momentary silence.

Satisfied he had chosen well, he continued with his speech.

"Overpopulation: What does it mean? Too many people and not enough jobs. Those without jobs turn to crime, so it's obvious crime has gone up. Education has declined as the caring associated with having a respectable job has vanished for many, especially in the cities, and I am referring primarily to the U.S., it is, after all, where I was born. Since the turn of the century, humanity has lost several generations to hopelessness. And when people give up hope, they can become a dangerous lot. The south African uprising was brought about by the great disparity between the races. Of course, look what's happened to that nation since majority rule took hold."

"Some have suggested colonizing other planets as a way of reducing world population pressures. I do not see a future where even those nations with the means desire to see that goal achieved. So, what are we to do about this problem?"

This was the real reason for this meeting, I thought. The embargo must have just been a cover for whatever he's planning, I summarized.

"As you know, many of you have nicknamed me 'the Unifier'. I'm sure whoever thought of that name was referring to my ability to bring us spacelings together and that he had no idea of my ultimate goal - that of unifying once and for all Earth!"

He caught everyone completely off guard. How could a few tens of thousands of people unite all of humanity's ten billion crowded people? I immediately envisioned a bunch of ants trying to round up a herd of elephants. All I could see was of a future where a whole lot of ants were killed.

Louie LaSalle then articulated how we were to accomplish his lofty goal, within less than four years he hypothesized. The order was put to a vote, which of course was unanimous.

Afterwards, we melted away, to be briefed on our part in the coming "time of periculum".

CHAPTER SIX

Later that evening, I was awakened by an important call.

"Paul," said the voice on the other end, "we want you to go to Overlooker Station and take command of your former fighter squadron."

I was shocked. Washington must have heard about the embargo, I thought to myself. I wondered whether I should do as instructed. The importance of the intelligence bonanza I was being handed struck me. Then I was struck by a sinister thought - acting as the commander, I could order these planes anywhere, and SFInFE could use some

weapons now. My mind raced through various plans of attack on U.S. targets. But would the pilots obey, I worried.

"Sure, I'll take it," I said figuratively and literally.

"Good. Be there in twelve hours. We think SFinFE is planning something big, and we want you to have a reception party ready for them."

"I'll do my best, Sir," I said, still with no idea who was actually issuing the instruction.

"You'll do better than that. Chairman Severly out."

Upon hearing the name of the SFinFE mole, I immediately knew that the fighter squadron was being prepared for our takeover. All I needed to do now was prepare a plan.

Five hours later, I made my way to the hanger module at Libra Station. On my way, I caught up to a woman I had "rendezvoused" with occasionally. She was wearing a vibrant navy blue sweater, sporting a white collared blouse underneath. She had gracefully tied a blue bow, which hung enticingly around her shapely breasts. Her tight white pinstriped navy blue slacks fit her curves quite well, and produced a pleasing effect. She wore her blonde and orange tinted hair "poofed" out and curled inwards at her shoulders. Her purple eye shadow highlighted her long blue tinted eyelashes surrounding her deep brown eyes. She was a great lay, and with brains too! Someday,

I thought to myself, I am going to make Cheryl my wife. But that was the future, I had the present to be concerned about.

"Hi Cheryl, what're you doing up so early?" I asked.

"I couldn't sleep. How about you?" she answered in a depressed tone of voice.

"I'm going to capture a fighter squadron," I beamed with joy.

"Yeah, and I'm your wife," she said sarcastically.

Her facetiousness sent a chill down my back. "You'd better be ready to pop out a couple of kids, then, because I truly am going to get us a fighter squadron," I said seriously.

"You are serious," she said as she studied the face she had come to know so well.

"From where, how, when will you be," all sorts of questions began spilling from her.

"You know I can't talk about matters of security," I brushed her off. "But you can see me off, if you'd like," I offered.

We walked, arms around each other, to the hanger where we kissed good-bye.

I entered the airlock and waited for the pressure to equalize. The popping of my ears signified this had been accomplished. The pressure light turned green, and I entered the canopy of a TAV. I entered into the navcom the coordinates of my destination -- Overlooker.

About a half hour later, I reached my former flying space. As I flew a reconn of the area, I noted the station hadn't changed much since I was stationed as a Star Pilot with Space Command. The outside was a little scarred from reacting with atomic oxygen from the atmosphere, but all in all, it survived the war of '41 intact.

I asked for and received docking clearance. I quickly landed as instructed, and hopped out of the TAV. A lowly major was there to greet me. He looked disgruntled and undisciplined. I awaited his salute that did not look forthcoming.

"Don't you know how to salute, Major," I barked.

"Yes Sir!" snapped the major to attention.

I returned his salute, grinning to myself. "Where's General Mely?"

"Sir, he's sleeping in his cubit, Sir."

"So where are my quarters then," I asked obviously upset that I was not afforded proper respect by the general.

"Sir, if you will follow me, Sir," he motioned for me to follow.

I caught up to him and walked on his left, though proper etiquette dictated should have been on his right. I avoided hassling him any further, all of the while hoping the pilots were better disciplined than he. My plan depended on it.

After much walking, we arrived at my quarters.

"Here is your cubit, Sir," said the major dispassionately.

"Thank you Major, you are dismissed," I offered.

He saluted and walked away, cursing silently to himself about the old timer who just arrived.

I entered the room, and put my effects away. Checking my pocom, I noticed I had arrived an hour early. I had neglected to take into account the time zone difference between the two stations. I hoped the rest of my homework was more thorough than that. Just in case, I re-studied the specifications of the newest fighters I would be commanding. Compared to the TAVs I flew whilst here, the new ones were hot. Their navigational/attack (navtak) systems were tied directly into the Gips, so they were inherently stealthy. No emissions of any kind were required to find their targets. Even their C3is were secure, as tight jam-proof lasers were utilized as a means of communication. But they were beatable, and they did have flaws. In fact, they have the same flaws that every fighter has had since their inception a century and a half ago - they have human pilots.

CHAPTER SEVEN

In what used to be called San Pedro (since renamed Hornet's Nest), an unusual high level meeting was taking place. Louthier had called together his highest ranking surviving officers for a strategy meeting. Robe represented the flying insects, Stiver was from intelligence, Gernessy represented the flightless armored insects, Merri represented the special forces, Pilnick represented the MM, Lutz represented the

unarmored flightless insects, and Farlan, represented the chemical using insects, were all present before Louther for the first time since the struggle to liberate the world of humanity began.

Louther spoke first. "Robe. What can you tell me about this poisonous rain the human's call Tosbow?" he asked concerned.

Robe, a yellow jacket, flew next to Louther and addressed the group as a whole. "T.S.O. is an extremely toxic substance. I have heard reports that it's toxicity is greater than that of the fireballs over the fault nine generations ago."

"No way," interrupted Merri. "I was there. I know that nothing can compare to the great fireballs that seared everything in their path. And with the fireballs, there was no warning, just sudden heat and wind."

"True," concurred Robe. "However, you seem to forget the small radii of the fireballs and that only twenty have been known to exist. T.S.O. has been spread along the entire six day long front. And it's effects are instantaneous. The fireballs killed few of us instantly. It's more sinister effects are not apparent until later...um, you know what I meant," he corrected himself by noting that were it not for the mutating effects of the fireballs, Louther (his commander) would not be here.

"What measures have you taken to defend yourselves?" asked Louther ignoring the insult.

"We send volunteers, usually wasps, to scout out the area. When they pick up on their senses the rock-leaves that drop the Tosbow, they're supposed to tell those on the ground to take cover. Unfortunately, according to the few who survive the assault, they don't receive the warning until long after the rock-leaves pass overhead and dispense their deadly load. This can mean only two things- either the rock-leaves travel faster than sound, or the T.S.O. falls faster than sound. Either way, the humans seem to be violating a few basic natural laws, which no one can understand how. Regardless, we still send up volunteers, but it seems fruitless."

"Gernessy, do you have anything to add?" asked Louther. Robe scampered out of the way to allow Gernessy, an ant, to speak.

"Basically," began Gernessy, "it's like Robe said. By the time we sense the rock-leaves overhead, we have only one or two beats before the rain comes down. We don't even hear the machines until long after they've past, and then the sound is tremendous."

"What defenses are you employing against this?" asked Louther.

"What defenses can stop Tosbow without digging in and ceasing our attack?" was his hopeless reply.

"Maybe Farlan has something to add about this," suggested Louther. Gernessy took that as a sign to let Farlan speak, so he crawled away and let Farlan fly adjacent to Louther.

"We have analyzed the effects of the toxin. It is much like what wasps use, except that it is about two hundred percent more effective at killing, and reacts in only 1/47th of a beat. A dose equivalent to what a wasp dispenses will kill about 100 insects within a few beats."

Louther was astonished. "What can we possibly do against that?"

"Not a damn thing," was Farlan's reply.

"How many have we lost?" asked Louther.

Everyone clicked off their horrific losses. The humans seemed to be waging a war of extermination against them. If things kept up as they are, they war would be lost.

"I would like to point out that most of those killed were from the 'States, since only that repressive nation is using T.S.O.," interrupted Lutz. "And there is some good news. The U. S. forces have retreated about 3.4 days travel time eastwards. They've sprayed Tosbow in the vacated area, but it will dissipate in a few days."

"Good. How's our reserves holding out? What's the latest enemy body count?" asked Louther hopeful for some good news.

"1 088 human bodies are now being used as fungi feeders and for food for our larvae. Besides, we are gaining ground in Canada and Mexico. We should have a field report from those fronts within the next 60 beat sun altitude gain," announced Lutz.

"Good. Stiver, what do you have to add," Louther turned to the intelligence head.

"We have received reports that the U.S. is having some internal problems. It appears one of their younger hive wants to hatch too soon and gain independence early. The U. S. does not want this to happen, but if it does, it could be a political as well as a military bonus for us."

"How?" asked Louther.

"If this hive of larvae hatches early, it will cause a power struggle. Naturally, the U.S. will have to withdraw some forces from the front to fight this internal struggle. Also, because it is internal, the general focus will be on it, rather than on us. We shall therefore be able to mount a struggle from within against them. I have already ordered several thousand agents behind enemy lines to begin revolting. They are ready upon your order," announced Stiver.

"Consider it so," agreed Louther. Sensing a change in the mood of the cabinet around him, Louther delved deep within himself to find something stirring to say. "Harsects, let us continue the battle, for we are at a turning point in the history of Insectdom, and of this great land we inhabit," he preached.

"So be it!" came the unanimous reply.

The other insects left, leaving only Louther and Gernessy together contemplating things. After a few moments to collect his thoughts, it was Gernessy who spoke first. "Louther, I have a major complaint," he began.

"What is it?" asked Louther with genuine concern. Gernessy had been with him from the beginning, and he felt a special affection towards the little ant, unthinkable a few generations ago.

"My command has taken the brunt of the Tosbow attacks. Our combat strength is down nearly eighteen percent. We've had to send many of the troops to the rear because panic is breaking out amongst some of the front line troops. Most of the draftees have seen a few survivors, and they are frightened by what the future might hold for them. Isn't there something you can do to relieve the pressure on my forces?" he asked with the concern a general has for his forces.

"You heard Farlan's report. I think the only thing we can do is to outflank the U.S. and concentrate on Canada and Mexico. If we can get to Alaska, I know some leaders in Asia whom will follow our lead - but only if we are successful. Who knows, if our troops survive long enough, maybe the whole world will be engulfed in a struggle with this new larvae of the humans. We ruled the world once you know, before the terrible lizards, and by Sol we'll rule again!" As Louther said this, his eyes lit up and Gernessy could feel the power emanate from him.

"I am so glad we have a leader like you to carry out our destiny, not like Herman or Loak," professed Gernessy.

"Herman could have fulfilled destiny as easily as I am doing now, only the time was not right when he led us then. I sometimes wonder if I could have accomplished what he

did during those hard times so long ago..." and with that Louthier went into one of his often had dream like states.

Gernessy, satisfied nothing more would come of the meeting, crawled to his command hive, wondering along the way whether Louthier was worthy of the insect's complete trust in him. Just as he arrived at his entrance, Merri met him.

"I waited for you to be alone," said Merri.

"Why?" asked Gernessy, startled.

"You were at the meeting today. What do you think about the T.S.O. sprayings? I think it's asinine to continue fighting when the humans can annihilate us whenever they really wanted to."

"You shouldn't say things like that Merri. Pilnick's agents are everywhere. Besides, you've only lost 300,000. Compared to what I've lost, you have no right to bitch."

"Sure you've lost more number than I, but I've lost a greater percentage of my total force package than you - at last count 45 percent. That's what's so damn insane!"

"So what am I supposed to do? Go back in time and change the results of battle? If I could do that, we'd have won in '21 when our struggle began."

"Now look whose talking," noticed Merri.

"Yeah, I guess I am two headed, huh? Why don't we go somewhere more secure and talk," put forth Gernessy.

"How about hill 403?" asked Merri.

"Sounds fine to me."

They left together for the long trek to hill 403. After the first one beat sun altitude gain, they split up and agreed to meet after the sun reached the 130 beat altitude. After half a solar transit, they arrived within a few beats of each other. Merri began to construct an intricate web for himself, while Gernessy dug a little hole for himself. When finished, Gernessy initiated the conversation.

"One thing I can't get used to are those wasps. We ants and those wasps have been warring for over 70 million generations. It's only been in the last nine that we've cooperated. Good thing there's a war on, or we'd probably still be at each other's thoraxes."

"Yeah, I know what you mean," agreed Merri. "It's been real hard on us arachnids. The first two generations after we were united with all you other insects most of us died because we weren't allowed to eat flies anymore. So we turned to other kinds of food, like dead insects and each other. Now that there's a war on, we can at least suck the juices out of the dead humans."

"At least the war has done us some good," conceded Gernessy.

"I agree. It's good to war, but you can't war when one side isn't playing by the rules."

"It's that damn Tosbow. You're in special forces Merri. Can't you do something about it?"

"We tried," said Merri mournfully as he settled into his now completed web. "You heard my losses. Seventy-five percent of those were from a mission Farlan sent me on to capture some T.S.O. for analysis."

"What good would bringing Tosbow here do anyway. From what Farlan says, only time will keep us from being eradicated, and it appears that time is not on our side."

"Ah, but yes it is. There was a valid reason for getting the vials, one other than what I told you. Pilnick has come up with an effective plan dealing with Tosbow," announced Merri.

"Well, what is this great plan of Pilnick's," asked Gernessy sarcastically.

"Pilnick has established a vast larvae colony out in the mutant zone where the fireballs were born nine generations ago. He placed it there so the maximum mutation rate will occur, hopefully leading to a better insect, a sort of Supersect, of sorts. Already he has developed several different species resistant to the effects of other forms of chemical warfare adopted by Mexico and Canada."

"How does the T.S.O. fit into all of this?"

"Aside from analyzing it, Pilnick plans to feed these new Supersects extremely limited amounts of Tosbow over a period of several generations. He hopes in time the Supersects will become resistant to its effects, thereby allowing us to continue the war."

"Can't you see what he's doing?" asked Gernessy alarmed.

"No."

"He's using you to create a master race of insects, over which he'll rule as supreme leader," proposed Gernessy.

"I think you're exaggerating things, Gernessy."

"No, I'm not. Haven't you seen the way he's playing up to Louther? And have you listened to his broadcasts lately? Or even talked to Pilnick one on one?"

"No."

"Well, I have, and I tell you he's out to become dictator. And if what you say is true, he and his private little army of Supersects are more dangerous than we anticipated?"

"We?" asked a confused Merri. From behind the grasses came forth Lutz, Robe, and fourteen others he had never seen before.

"Welcome to the rebellion," extended Gernessy.

Merri looked across at the emergent Robe. "Why are you mixed up in this Robe?" he asked.

"The same as all of us -- to stop this war before it's too late," answered Robe.

"We want to guarantee that insects, as we know them, will survive on this orb for another 70 million generations," spoke a preying mantis whom Merri did not recognize. "Think of it as an insurance policy for the future of our species."

O.K., I'm in," accepted Merri.

"Then I suppose it's time to introduce to you your new colleagues. You already know Robe and Lutz, so let me introduce you to the other fourteen members of the team," advanced Gernessy. "On your left, the one whom just broadcast, is Flapper (a preying mantis); next to him is Ilathia (a queen bee); on her right is Sempda (a termite); on his right is Wernier (a common spy-i.e. a house fly); directly in front is Carlos (a Mexican fruit fly); on his left is Pythomias (a Mediterranean fruit fly); on her left is Arabia (a horsefly); on her left is Weber (a black widow); on her left is Long fellow (a daddy longlegs); on his left is Sapper (a worker ant); on his left is Stonly (a mud wasp); on his left is Dydgon (another spy); on her left is Feeder 12 (a feeder ant); and finally Queen Frisco (a queen ant)." They all exchanged various greetings with Merri.

"Why don't we get right down to business and brief Merri on the latest details. Sapper, will you broadcast to Merri last week's emergency meeting's minutes?"

"Sure," said the ant. "Last week we held the first meeting of insects to discuss the goings on of the war. We came to the conclusion that it wasn't going our way in the 'States. We are doing good in Canada and Mexico, but that's only because those nations have not used Tosbow. We decided to have another meeting today to answer the questions we came up with. The are as follows: (1) How long can we expect to last

if the U.S. continues using Tosbow against us? (2) What are the chances Mexico and Canada will use Tosbow? (3) What will the final outcome be if we continue our present course? We couldn't answer any of these last meeting because of poor intelligence. Additionally, I proposed a fourth question be answered today or at the next meeting. The question is, what is this young larvae in the U.S., and how will it's early development affect questions 1, 2, and 3," narrated Sapper.

"Very good Sapper. This forum is open for discussion," proclaimed Gernessy.

Robe asked to be recognized and he promptly was. "I'd like to address question number one. I've been talking with Farlan, and I have been assured that there is nothing we can do about T.S.O. Armed with this knowledge, I went to Pythomias and asked him to do a census on the current population of Insectland. He estimated it to be on the order of 5×10^{10} . Then I went back to Farlan and asked him to assume an unlimited supply of Tosbow were available to humans. Doing some mild calculations, we found that one wasp sting volume will kill 940 insects in 2.4 beats. Dividing our population by 940 insects per 2.4 beats, we came up with 5.3×10^4 wasp sting volumes of Tosbow to kill all of us within 2.2×10^7 beats to do it in. Next, we divided this number by 3000 beats a sun travel and came up with 7358.7 days. If we divide this number by 3640 sun travels per generation, we came up with the astonishing conclusion that all insects in Insectland will be dead in two generations."

Merri was the only one who was surprised. Everyone else was grateful, for their own numbers had shown gloomily that it would take only a half of a generation to exterminate their kind.

"Very good Robe," applauded Gernessy. "We now know the answer to question number one. I would like to comment on your analysis though. Assuming 5.3×10^7 wasp sting volumes of Tosbow, how does that relate in human terms?"

"I can answer that," claimed Wernier.

"Go ahead," allowed Gernessy.

"Take 5.3×10^7 and do some calculations, and you come up with about 10,000 kilograms are needed to wipe us out. I have personally seen hundreds of 750 kilo dispensers in warehouses, so I don't think Tosbow is the limiting agent," answered Wernier.

"What is?" asked Merri.

"Insects," came the forlorn reply. There was silence for a while, until Gernessy started things rolling again.

"Let's address question two," he proposed.

"I think the chances are good that the Mexican Government will use T.S.O. if we get much further," put forth Carlos.

"What are the odds?" asked Gernessy.

"80 percent."

"I can say with certainty that Canada will begin using it soon. I heard Washington instructing the Canadian Ambassador on its usage the other day," announced Dydgon.

"And I've heard that the Independent Russian States have developed something similar to the toxin," claimed Stonly.

"So, that brings us to question three," proposed Gernessy.

"I think we'll be lucky if we last 1 generation," claimed Sempda. "The information Robe used assumed insects were being killed 940 by 940. We all know this is not the case. The humans are, if anything, killing 1 by 200. They seem obsessed with over doing the job. It's taking them longer than one beat to kill 940 insects."

"I disagree," countered Arabia. "I think we can last at least two generations. The Canadians won't use Tosbow - they're concerned with the environmental effects. We will, therefore, be able to gain significant territory, or sue for peace at a reasonable cost."

"Bullshit. No one's suing for anything. There's no guarantee it will last," protested Weber.

"Everyone's entitled to their opinion, even if it is wrong," retorted Arabia.

"Quiet you two," ordered Gernessy. "There's no room for that B.S. in this forum."

"I think we'll survive the war, and not only that, but we'll be able to live in peace alongside the humans," claimed Merri.

"Impossible," spoke Feeder 12.

"Yeah, we can't live with them, we're incompatible. This *is* the fourth war we've fought with them since '21," said Ilathia.

"I think we ought to sue for peace now," said Sapper.

"We can't do that! The populace would revolt against our leader," warned Wernier.

"I'll personally suck the blood of anything that sues for peace," threatened Weber.

"You and who else," defended Stonly.

"Leave him alone, Stonly," inputted Dydgon.

"Stop it all of you," said Carlos worried. "you're acting like we used to before unification."

"He's right," supported Pythomias.

"Look," interceded Merri. "I tell you we can survive this war and be better off than ever before."

"How?" asked Flapper.

"Let me address question number one first. We know there's an internal struggle going on inside the 'States. I have met with a member of the young larvae group who are attempting to leave the ruler ship of the adults. He is a member of a hive they call SFInFE. He assures me that if they are successful, the war against us will be halted,

and we will be able to negotiate some kind of treaty with them. Unfortunately, their goals cannot be won without our aid," he explained.

"Screw 'em," said Weber.

"Listen. I have opened the possibility to bring about a favorable end to this war and all you want to do is kill yourselves over the next one or two generations. Well you can go to San Andreas, because I'm going to try my hardest towards my aim. All I want to know is: are you with me or against me."

"That's it, let me at him," sneered Weber.

"You make one move and I'll crush your legs," threatened Flapper as he grabbed Weber with his powerful mandibles.

"But he's a traitor," argued Weber. "You heard - he wants to end the war!"

"We're all traitors Weber, otherwise we wouldn't be meeting in secret like this," pleaded Gernessy.

"He talks like Pilnick," observed Merri. Suddenly, the whole group seized upon that thought.

"That's right, I'm one of the MM. I hope Pilnick feeds you to his 'Supersects' as you've coined them. In one generation he'll control all of Insectland and the war will really begin, after all, Tosbow has no effect on **us**."

That statement shocked everyone, for the idea of "Supersects" was previously just an idea. Now here was one in the flesh. Suddenly, he leaped from Flapper's grasp right towards Stonly. Stonly stood frozen with fear. Weber's mandible opened, set to spring shut like a mouse trap. Stonly began his takeoff. It was too late, Weber's monstrous mandibles clamped down on Stonly's left leg. Stonly swung around using his clamped leg as an axis of rotation, and landed atop Weber. Weber tightened his grip, and Stonly's leg snapped off. Stonly revved up his stinger and plunged it into Weber's abdomen, releasing a standard volume of poison. Weber burst out laughing. Stonly pulled out the stinger and plunged it in again, releasing still more toxin. It was the moment Weber was waiting for. She pushed off and Stonly and her flew through the air, landing upside down on the ground. Weber clamped her mandible around Stonly's head, decapitating it quickly. Though without command, Stonly's stinger kept stinging the cold air.

"Who's next," asked Weber. No one said anything. "I thought as much. You're all chicken shits."

"I'd rather be a chicken shit and live to see another day than to be a genetic reject like yourself," yelled someone.

"Who said that," asked Weber furiously.

"I did," announced Merri as he stepped from behind a blade of grass. "Lets see what you've got, bitch," toyed the male version which all black widows devoured after sex.

Weber charged at Merri, her temper furious. Merri knew what was coming, and he prepared for it. When Weber came and began her powered pounce, Merri slid left and did a flip, so as to lie on his back. Weber tried to compensate for Merri's changed position, but instead only resulted in tumbling through midair and landing away from Merri. Getting up, she quickly charged anew at Merri. Good, he coming, thought Merri. Weber came on and jumped on top of Merri, grabbing Merri's leg with her mandibles. Ignoring the intense pain in his leg, Merri clamped his own pair of jaws around Weber's neck. Weber was taken by surprise by the adept athletic ability of her prey. He sliced off Merri's leg effortlessly, and she tried to push away from him. With Merri's grip tightening, Weber had little time left to react. Knowing she was stronger, she gripped Merri's neck, and the two were locked in a death grip. Everyone watched with fascination as the two struggled for an advantage. Who would win? Merri had established his

lock earlier and Weber had just been involved in another battle. But Weber was stronger, and all things being equal, she would be the winner. She began to black out, and in a final effort, clamped down as hard as she could. Merri tightened his grip even as he began to lose consciousness. He heard a loud snap, and was relieved to feel Weber's severed head. But wait. Was Merri delirious, or was Weber's grip tightening? It was. Merri tried desperately to push away the decapitated but still functioning head away, but he heard another snap, and his whole left side of his body became numb. Weber's mandibles then relaxed, and the head rolled to the ground near the now motionless Merri.

"Is he alive?" asked Carlos, looking at the juices oozing from the side of Merri's neck.

"It appears so, confirmed Gernessy.

"We'd better help him."

"Where's he live?" asked someone.

"I know where. We'd better take him and get help," said Gernessy. He arranged a detail to take Merri to his home web. It would take a while to get there, and even longer for news of Weber's death to get back to Pilnick. Would Merri be alive to take his wrath, wondered Gernessy.

CHAPTER EIGHT

General Glen Penard Walthers was dreaming happily until he was awakened by a call from his deskcom.

"What is it?" he asked sleepishly. A few high pitched sounds greeted his question. His mind blurred, he asked the other side to repeat what they had said. When they did so, he could tell the sounds were a dialect of insectese.

"We need to talk with you Mr. Ambassador."

"What do you want," he said not really in the mood to discuss diplomacy at the moment.

"We want to contact a human by the name of Louie LaSalle."

"I'll be down in a few minutes," he said as he rushed to get his clothes on. Arriving at the consultation room, he was greeted by two spiders, an ant, and a yellow jacket. The yellow jacket was doing the speaking.

"Mr. Ambassador, do you know of a spider named Merri?" asked Gernessy, his voice compulated.

"I don't believe I do," lied Glen.

"Can you place us in contact with Louie LaSalle?" they asked.

"Sure, I'll try," said Lee as he called up a directory from his pocom. Finding the number, he printed it out and waited for someone to answer. After a few minutes, the call was answered.

"Hello," said the heavily accented voice on the other end.

"This is Ambassador Walthers calling from inside Insectland. There are a few insects here who request an audience with a Louie LaSalle."

"What are their names?" asked the voice.

"Hold on, I'll ask them," he said as he asked for their names.

"We're Gernessy, Robe, and Lutz. We're friends of Merri's."

"Where's Merri?" asked the voice.

"He's been wounded very badly during a struggle with a member of the MM. We ask your medical assistance in helping to return him to us."

LaSalle considered this a few minutes before answering. "I should be able to come down tomorrow?" he said.

"Thank you," said Gernessy.

"What kind of shape is he in?" he asked.

"He has nervous system damage and is unconscious."

"O.K., I'm on my way there. Wait for me," instructed Louie as he collected some supplies and headed for the embassy.

CHAPTER NINE

I was startled into a state of awakenedness by the loud sound of klaxons going off. Immediately I fell into the old familiar battle routine, but to my despair, I couldn't find any combat gear. I then realized why. This wasn't '27, it's '50. I'm a General now in command of a fighter squadron. I put on my flight uniform and ran to the briefing room. When I entered the brightly lit room, the thirty pilots rose and came to attention. When I took my seat, they followed suit.

General Mely was situated before us, about ready to speak. We had served in the same unit together during '41. He and I were two of only three survivors. I respected

him greatly for his combat abilities. There were many times when we owed each others our lives.

General Mely rose to address the group assembled before him. "Let me introduce to you the Squadron Commander for today's flight," he said with pride in his voice. "His name is General Joeles. He served with this unit from '28 'til '43, and has logged over 50,000 **actual** flight hours in P.O.L. fighters. He will be leading today's attack against the Romanov Eleven Station. General Joeles," he introduced me, his hand outstretched.

I rose from my chair, and walked quickly towards him. As I covered the few steps required to make the transit, I thought back to the days of old. Romanov Eleven was abandoned right after the war of '41, I thought. Why would it be a target, unless this was just a training mission for my benefit? If it was only a training mission, I would have to alter my plans a bit. There was only one way to find out for sure. I grasped his hand firmly, and shock with the vigor of old friends whom had not seen each other for a very long time. Releasing my grip, I turned towards the assembled men and waited for General Mely's briefing to continue.

"Romanov Eleven was attacked and captured three hours ago by that rebel trash SFIInFE. We have received at 0813 World Standard Time a formal **declaration of war** from them. Since that time, they have emplaced an embargo on Earth and are interdicting supplies between space and terra. We have been ordered by Washington, in concert with the U.N., to attack Romanov Eleven and use it as a staging base for our attack against their headquarters - Libra Station."

Libra Station? My mind reeled, remembering the events of the past thirty hours or so. While it seemed possible that we could have done what Mely said, I doubted we could have actually carried an attack like that out. I listened with great interest to the plan of attack as outlined by George. It ended with the usual act of no one asking questions, well, that is except for me.

"Excuse me, General, " I said to George after the others had left. "What will I be flying? I haven't even done any sim time in a S.T.L., and it's been years since I've flown an **Eagle** ?"

"I knew that. We brought old number eighty one out of retirement, just for you," smiled the general.

That's cool, I thought. I needed familiarity right now in my predicament. I knew the '34 **Eagle** P.O.L. number eighty one like the postman knows your wife. She was the first ship I flew, and the last. It was the only plane to have the same pilot from com to decom. That said a lot about the plane **and** the pilot flying it. She was the last of a breed, born at the height of the military confrontation between Russia and the United States of America. They had an excellent thrust to mass ratio, could pull more G's than the body could absorb, and were the last space assets to be hardened against E. M. P. (Electromagnetic Pulse Radiation effects from thermonuclear detonations). I hoped it could keep up with the next generation '48 S.T.L. **Stiletto**s the other pilots would be flying.

Arriving at the hanger, the size of the **Stiletto**s impressed me. My **Eagle** was dwarfed by the larger offspring. Only two years old, the **Stiletto**s still had teething problems though. They went straight from the one prototype to production, and many of the Block A models were relegated to R.P.V. (Remotely Piloted Vehicles) Squadrons (no pilot felt safe in them - they were nicknamed the "diving arrow" because when the software failed as it often did in atmosphere, the plane broke up). But the newer Block B, and now Block C upgrades had taken care of those deficiencies. The Skunk works at Sundstrand-TRW-Lockheed had done a wonderful job of integrating stealth characteristics into an airframe which due to it's severe operating environment was inherently unstealthy. How they reduced the infra-red signature from the hydrogen slush fueled scramjets was beyond my ability to divine.

As I did the preflight walk around, my hands caressed the titanium skin of my old friend. My 15 L.E.A. (Larger Euro-Asian) '34s and numerous sat kills were emblazoned, still looking as fresh as if painted yesterday, on the nose. I climbed into the machine, and closed the metal canopy. The Polar-Orbital Sciences-Loral **Eagles** were the first ships utilizing virtual reality view screens as necessitated by the impracticality of using transparent medium in the high lase threat experienced by fighters. The same principal was now employed in transports and TAVs everywhere. I harnessed myself securely into the cockpit. I had seen too many rookie pilots get their eggs broken from not being netted properly. As I went through the preflight checkout, I remarked upon how much more advanced this old bird was than even my '50 Ganemede Speedster trans I leased was. But then a trans was meant to be flown only in atmosphere, it was not a TAV.

The countdown began, and as the last few seconds ran off, I tensed up and prepared myself for the onslaught of Gs. At zero hour, the twelve redundant computers kicked on the jettisonable SRBs, sending my craft and I hurtling at eight Gs. I looked at my scope and could see the others leaving the station and attempting to catch up. As the Gs' built up to 10.2, the SRBs were jettisoned, and the craft reached its cruise speed.

With the navcom already instructed as to where the destination was, I had time to reminisce about the old days. I reflected upon seeing a young hot-shot pilot, emotional from my first kill. I'd seen many of my friends die, and I wanted revenge against the russkies. Sitting in this very fighter, I'd fly out and strafe all of the russkie sats. It was a dangerous job, as most of them contained on-board proximity mines, which all too often took the aggressor out along with the target. If I was lucky, I'd get to tango with a L.E.A. **Firedart.** Each mission would last about ten hours, and when we returned we would go to the nearest club and party like it was our last night alive (for many, it was). With all of the memories flooding back to me, it was not surprising that when I saw a vintage L.E.A. I immediately instructed the atcom to initiate the combat program and began my run.

I kicked on the glowers and gained a few meters per second over my prey. Either the bandit didn't know I was behind it, or he was playing with me. I backed off the thrust and slowed to a few centimeters per second gain over it. I was within attack range, signaled the atcom. Still, the bogie did not try to evade, and the sense of fun began to diminish. This is no fun, I thought. I kicked on the glowers and flew past him (an often suicidal maneuver). Still, the target took no action. I was beginning to wonder. I hadn't realized it, but I was being hailed incessantly, against all orders. I acknowledged.

"General, we show you as being in attack mode against that **Firedart**. It's not '41 you know. Break off the..."

General? Not '41? Break off? Glancing at the view screen, I found before me a **Firedart**, cross hairs centered on the fuselage, weapons on, ready to go. The fog cleared and I immediately aborted the program, and reset the cocom to the mission profile as programmed. That L.E.A.s lucky someone broke radio silence, I remarked to myself.

"This is Eagle Four acknowledging. Thanks for waking me up hot-shots. I took a little trip back to 2041 for awhile. Eagle Four out."

"I'll be sure to put myself on report for breaking R.D. silence," came the reply from the voice I recognized as belonging to my wing man.

"Nothing doing, son. Officially, nothing happened out here. We've got a mission, now lets do it," I pressed.

About half of an hour later, we arrived at our formation area. Simultaneously, all of the fighters in my squadron formed into a three staged staggered nine arrow formation. I instructed the atcom to fire off a few rounds of the HVG (Hyper Velocity Gun) as a test. Even though I told the atcom to set proximity fuses for a five second burst, the craft seemed unaffected by the propulsion of the depleted uranium rounds. Still, after five seconds, the screen showed the customary burst as expected.

We neared the target, and I pressed the attack. I aimed some H.V.M.s at the base of the command module and instructed the atcom to fire. The missiles slid off their rails and crashed into the station. Explosive decompression, coupled with the detonation of the missiles, obliterated the entire module. Other modules were similarly destroyed.

I was hailed on the radio. The station was surrendering.

"Let us board," I demanded.

"Proceed to hanger X-1,Y-2, Z-0," was the reply.

I flew my craft close to the station, initiating a reconn of the area before I landed. As I flew past, I noticed the old Red Squadron emblem painted freshly on the otherwise weathered station skin. The Red Squadron used to play the aggressor role during the 20's through the 40's. Seeing this, coupled with my belief that this station was abandoned years ago reaffirmed my belief that this was just a training mission. That being the case, I would not be armed.

I kicked on the glowers and formed up behind my wing man. I instructed the atcom to give me tone, and in two seconds my cockpit resounded with the tone of the HVG's guidance system acquiring the target. I fired. My screen exploded with fire as the **Stiletto** before me disintegrated.

"What the hell!" yelled my wing man, angry that he had been "killed" and his controls were inoperative now. But he was still alive, and his ship undamaged. Only the computers didn't know that.

"O.K. boys, we waxed their tails, good job. Now to rebrief you on your *real* mission. Now I know what you were briefed by George, but he didn't think it wise to tell you the true nature of our mission until we completed this little 'exercise'. Our mission is to fly to Libra Station and use it as our staging area. I am sending the coordinates through your acoms now, so your navcoms will be set right. Onward to Libra Station," I exclaimed.

I loaded the coordinates into their acoms, and watched for confirmation that they acceded to my orders. They willingly did so. I was relieved that pilots were still trained to follow orders, rather than acting as individuals. If they had been actually armed, and any of them were mavericks, my plan would not succeed.

As we neared Libra Station, I raised them on the lascom.

"Come in Libra, this is Jaffrin."

"Roger Jaffrin, this is Libra. What's the I.F.F. for today?" asked the voice dispassionably.

"Pentel," I answered.

"Roger that Jaffrin. What do you want?"

"I have two dozen unsuspecting pilots here as a present to the big guy," I remarked.

"Roger that. What is your E.T.A."

"Five minutes."

"Roger that. Will have party when you arrive. Libra out."

Five minutes later, we arrived at Libra and flew a reconn past. Then we landed in various hangers, met by official looking guards. When the unsuspecting pilots egressed from their craft, they were surrounded and stockaded until after the war. I told Linda about Washington's plans, and an emergency meeting of the Fourth Congress was immediately called. When all of the delegates were assembled to discuss the situation, we waited for the "Unifier" to show up. After twelve minutes, we found his TAV gone, and decided to start without him. Everyone wondered where he could be at a time like this...

CHAPTER TEN

It had been a long time since he had seen Merri. Merri was a remarkable spider. For having such a minuscule brain, he seemed to have more common sense than some humans Louie knew. And now he needed my help, thought Louie. And Louie needed Merri's help. Merri was one of the few insects capable of coexisting with Homo Sapiens. This coexistence was a goal that Louie had to accomplish before SFIInFE's ultimate goal could be achieved. We must make peace with the life on our planet before we can hope to exist in the universe with other beings, he believed. But first

things first - and that was unifying the world into one homogenous entity, capable of rallying for the stars.

Louie LaSalle looked behind at the medical gear he had brought. He had been a surgeon not too long ago and achieved the first successful brain transplant back in '34. After that accomplishment and all of the laurels associated with such an historic event, Louie left the macro world of human anatomy and entered the micro world of the insects. It was research into brain transplants, that he arrived at a means of communicating with "lower" brains. Merri had been his most successful test subject

After various transplant operations, Merri's neural networks became interwoven with the newly implanted neural tissue and accepted it as it's own. Through a compulator which he invented, Louie and Merri established the first contact between different phylum's. They conversed over many years, and each gained an understanding of the other's lives and thought processes. It was during these early conversations that Merri gained many of the ideals that he holds now.

The process was a two way street. Louie gained valuable insight into the survival instincts and the ability to regenerate lost body parts which some lower forms were capable of. Unfortunately, when Merri was assimilated into the human's advanced culture, he lost some of his older functions (i.e. the ability to regenerate). Thus, Louie came to help a good friend who was under duress.

After he landed at the embassy, he talked with Walthers (who had no idea that Louie was the "Unifier") and the insects who had brought Merri there. Taking stock of the

situation, Louie acted quickly and immediately began the operation to save the spider's life. Two hours later, his task complete, Louie provoked the arachnid into a state of consciousness.

"Where am I," asked the little spider, dizzy from the anesthesia.

"Woah, hold on there fella. You're all right, I fixed you up," proclaimed Louie.

Merri rose and tested his new leg. It worked, as did his formerly paralyzed side, confirming that the surgeon had done a good job as usual. "Yes you did," he said.

"Can we be alone," asked Louie, glancing at the other insects. They quickly left.

"I hear you've joined an anti-war group and that you want my help. I need help too. Perhaps we can make a deal?" hoped the "Unifier".

"Depends. What have you got going?" asked the intrigued spider.

"It's like this. I hear you think you can actually survive this war. I know that you can only do so with my help. But, the only way I can help you is if you aid me."

"Let me guess. If I help you gain control of Washington, you'll end this?" asked Merri.

"Not only that, but I'll bring the insects into full equality with humanity," he offered.

"I'm glad I chose the path I did. You know, when I was unconscious, I dreamt of a time when humans and insects cooperated together. Not only that, but **all** life on this planet

was linked into a sort of planetary consciousness. Do you think SFInFE will undertake this as a goal?"

"I guarantee that by the time this war's over, all life on this planet will be united. Deal?"

"Yes," exclaimed Merri happy at the new partnership which would forever change the existence of life on Earth.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

"...so let me say again, we now have the means to take control, so lets seize this opportunity and bomb the hell out of Washington. With these thirty fighters, we have enough destructive power to take over the entire Western Hemisphere. Once this has been accomplished...."

Big fucking deal, I mused silently to myself. Severly's been talking, or filibustering, for the past two and a half hours. He just keeps saying the same thing - *bomb the world and we shall be free*. I looked around and saw most of the delegates were asleep. This wouldn't be happening if the "Unifier" were here, as I wished it so.

"...pilot the fighters to within ten kilos of the target and let the navtak systems do the rest. Assuming twenty five rockets per fighter, and one rocket per city, we can devastate over 600 cities across..." he droned ceaselessly.

The door to the chamber opened and in stepped our savior.

"...oops. And that's all I have to say," quickly summed up Al Severly as he practically ran off the platform. The delegates began to awaken.

Louie walked over to the platform and waited for everyone to awaken before speaking. "My fellow delegates...I have just returned from an illuminating meeting Stateside. Upon my return, I found my usual docking space occupied with a **Stiletto**, assuring me that Mr. Jaffrin successfully completed his assigned mission. We now have the tools necessary to complete the next phase of our struggle."

"I have talked with some insects from the U.S. front lines, and they tell me the planes which fly overhead dropping Tosbow are the same ones Paul acquired for us..."

At the mention of insects a few people gasped, apparently unaware that it was possible to communicate with them.

"..so with a little paint job and a whole lot of luck, we can infiltrate our planes into the U.S. forces and **accidentally** dispense Tosbow over a populated area..."

He was met by an almost unanimous gasp from the assembly.

"Now I know you realize Tosbow will likely kill most of those people exposed to it, but think of the political effects it will have. Why to have their own government poison them will surely cause people to revolt and overturn the present leaders. The spraying of Tosbow will be halted, and the insects will be able to do their thing. Within days, Washington will be ours, and afterwards, Canada, Mexico, gaining momentum after

each nation dissolves into anarchy, until finally the whole world is ours...!" he expelled proudly, full of the power emanating from within.

Everyone applauded him and gave him a standing ovation.

"Oh, and one more think," continued Louie in an more sinister tone. "The next time I leave, I don't want to find any filibustering going on. It's against the Compact, and I will prosecute the moron who does it.," he leered towards Severly.

"O.K., now on to operational matters. We have to act fast. According to the reports I've received, the U.S. has told it's forces that we've declared war. They have prepared to attack us, and were it not for our cue from Chairman of the J.C.S. Severly, we would now be but molecules floating in orbit. I'm putting Paul Jaffrin in command of the next mission. You'll get your briefing from him after I've consulted with him about the missions you'll be undertaking. I leave you with one phrase of advice - Act fast, don't sit on your ass!" and with that Louie walked briskly off the stage, and motioned for me to follow.

"This closes the Fourth Congress..." said Specanner Jari Talea as she slammed the gavel against the desk.

CHAPTER TWELVE

President Tomar Burton was feverously battling a salmon when his pocom buzzed. He ignored its call and continued the battle. The eighteen kilogram salmon was putting up one heck of a fight, but Tomar was a good fisherman. He slowly reeled the pink salmon closer. The pocom buzzed again. Tomar reached into his pocket and pulled the little computer out, acknowledging the request.

"Mr. President," began the voice on the other end. "General Aloni of the J.C.S. wants to speak with you - priority one flash," a sense of urgency was present in the voice.

"What's the code word for today?" asked Tomar nonchalantly. Aloni had been known to scream priority one to his underlings for an anti-acid.

"Croesus," came the serious reply.

At the mention of the dreaded code word Croesus, the President dropped his reel and ran to his Presidential trans, calling for his aides panicly. Within seconds the trans flew over the Maine pines and landed near the President. The canopy swung open and Tomar climbed in and harnessed himself securely. As soon as he was harnessed, Alan Stuzman kicked on the SRBs and they were on their way to the staging area.

"The TAVs waiting for you at Thomas Air Force Base. E.t.a.'s about four minutes away," announced his aide.

"Good. Patch me through to Aloni," ordered the President.

"Roger," said Alan as he made the connection.

"General, this is Burton. What's the deal?"

"It's Croesus, Sir. I received a formal declaration of war thirteen minutes ago from SFInFE," he explained.

"Are we in imminent danger?"

"It doesn't appear so at this moment. However, I have placed our armed forces on worldwide alert."

"Only I can do that General," scolded the President.

"I tried to reach you Mr. President. After three minutes of trying, I gave up and tried to reach the Vice President. I couldn't reach him either, and since Speaker Mead died three days ago, there's no one left in the political line of succession. So in effect, I was in charge at the white house." Those words echoed a former Secretary of State during the Reagan era, remembered Tomar. His aide signaled to him that they were preparing to land.

"Hold on General, I'm transferring to my TAV. We'll pick this up when inside. Tomar out."

"Aloni out."

Alan landed the trans about twenty meters away from the waiting TAV. They unharnessed themselves and jogged over to the vehicle. Two Space Command SPs were waiting for them at the steps of a ladder leading up to the canopy.

"Welcome aboard, Sir," said one of them as the two dignitaries made their way quickly up the steps. Once inside and secured, the guards entered the craft, and the pilot began his takeoff.

"Alan, I want you to convene an emergency meeting of Congress right away, under the Croesus contingency. See what you can do," the President forced out as he fought the rapid buildup of G forces.

"Roger, it's in works," he said.

"Get the J.C.S. to **Sanctuary** as well. I'll need a briefing by them and the N.S.A."

"Check." Alan entered the commands, and within seconds he received a reply. "J.C.S. is sending General Walthers to brief us," he informed his superior.

"Good. Have you ever been to **Sanctuary**?" asked Tomar.

"No, I thought that was mothballed after President Gilbert left it when '41 was over," expressed the aide.

"They even have you in the dark, eh, Alan? Well, I'll tell you. The N.S.A.'s had people there continuously since the place was constructed in '24. I'll bet most of the

congressmen didn't even know about it until they opened their briefing packages," guessed the President.

Alan just shook his head affirmatively.

"What's out E.T.A.?" asked Tomar.

"Less than seven minutes, Sir," said the pilot. "We're about to enter communications blackout, so don't be alarmed," he cautioned.

Tomar leaned back in his chair nervously. He hoped SFIInFE didn't attack while he was in excommunicato.

"What do you mean he's not going to be here for another thirty minutes? Doesn't he know what Croesus means?" scolded the President.

"Mr. President. If Congress had not vetoed our last budget request, we would have had the money to provide General Walthers with a TAV. It's a damn shame on this government that he had to fly his own trans. What if he didn't own one?" asked the Chairman of the National Security Agency.

"Thank you Tu. I'll see what I can do for your next year's budget. Burton out."

Tomar turned and spoke to his Vice President. "You know Tom, we're going to have to do something about the N.S.A. They're getting too cocky again," commented the President.

"I know Tomar. What do you say we start without this Walthers guy. I'm, sure it'll bust his ego."

"Splendid idea my friend. I do believe you're getting a streak of intelligence in you. Where have you been keeping it all of these years?" joked the President.

"Ask your wife," shot back the Vice President. They exchanged glances, seeking to ascertain the truthfulness of that barb. Then Tomar burst out laughing, to the relief of Thomas Cain, his Vice President. They both laughed and walked into the Congressional Shaft. As soon as the President sat, the meeting began.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

At the same time as the Congressional meeting convened, the Unifier and several guests gathered in the command module and peered out the window, anxiously awaiting the final moments.

"There they go," observed Severly. The people turned their heads and followed thirty points of light speeding away from Libra, heading toward the Earth below.. After they disappeared from view, the Unifier turned to address the group.

"Friends...a toast. To the gallant men and woman who are now on their way to change forever the world below us." And with that, everyone raised their glasses of champagne and drank heartily. After drinking all of the champagne, Louie sat down in his chair and prepared to transmit to the rest of the station. He switched on his deskcom and spoke to everyone on the station. "They have now entered Earth's atmosphere and are about twelve minutes from their targets. I would like to take a moment to share with you one of my experiences. Many years ago, while still a doctor, I was faced with a crucial decision. One that involved thousands of millions of lives. It was after the war of '41, and I was in charge of the N.R.P.- - the National Recovery Program, Medical Division. I had two choices proposed to me about what to do with the wounded survivors of the nuclear exchange that occurred. One was, treat them in accordance with traditional methods and have about sixty-four percent of them live a life of misery. The second, was to implant a newly developed genetic code into the patient's cells, hoping it would counter act the effects of radiation. In the tests we had already conducted on animals and in computer studies, when it worked, there was a 94 percent chance of total recovery and the prospect of a happy and full life down the road for many years. The problem was, it had never been tested on humans before. After much thought, I felt the benefits outweighed the risks, and I authorized it's administration to the survivors. Of those who did not reject the implants, 91 percent recovered fully. Only nine percent of those who received the new code died. I felt I made the right decision then, as I do now. Sure, many innocent people will die, but more will be better off because of the struggle. It is thus that I ask for a moment of silence, so that we may remember our loved ones. Reach out to those about to die, and let them know they aren't dying in

vain..." After several minutes of intense concentration, he felt everyone reaching out to Earth. Contact! "Thank you," he said as he disconnected the link and turned to look out at the blue green planet above him. All of the invited guests too that as a sign to leave, and they did so accordingly. All but one, that is. Louie could see Cheryl's reflection off the glass and he motioned for her to sit next to him. She pulled her chair closer and reclined, revealing her nice curves. Louie looked at her for a few moments, reading her emotions carefully. When he looked into her eyes he was saddened by what she felt.

"I can empathize with you Cheryl," he offered softly. "I have a wife whom I love deeply down there. She's in one of the target zones. There's a 99 percent chance she'll die instantly. It's that damn one percent that bothers me," he confessed.

"I didn't know, I mean that you had a wife. Did you tell her?" She asked.

"This is the way she wanted to go. Stupid, if you ask me, but she wanted her death to bring about the rise of a new order, and be the spiritual martyr that is implied but such actions."

"What are the chances our strike force returns?" She asked hopeful.

"Slim. I didn't tell anyone, but basically, this is a suicide mission."

"Oh." Cheryl sat quietly staring out the window. She focused in the States and looked for a special person in a special place. Louie looked out also, thinking to himself about what to say. When he pieced everything together, he turned to her and spoke softly again.

"It's Paul, isn't it? What's going on between you two?" He asked.

"Yeah. I'm so mad, I didn't see him when I had the chance...no, I take that back, **chances.**"

"We sometimes realize too late what we've lost," he observed.

"I know. Now I have a feeling I'm not going to see him again, and I never said good-bye."

"I'm sure he's thinking of you now. Besides, when he gets back, I'm sure you'll make it up to him."

"You think he'll be back?"

"Absolutely." They looked out the window again. Louie looked for and found the spot where his wife was. She's probably feeding the cats now, he thought as he glanced at his watch. And he slowly began to cry. He was not alone, for Cheryl soon joined him in a chorus.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

I was flying my old fighter, leading the thirty-odd **Stiletto**s and Pedro's '27 TAV in a cranked arrow formation towards our staging base. On the way through the

atmosphere, we dumped our excess fuel, whereupon it promptly burst into flames on contact with the oxygen in the atmosphere. The ignited hypergolic fuel created a fierce heat source which scarred all of our vehicles, making them appear battle-damaged. As we neared the main staging area, we went into the standard landing pattern, and maneuvered the vehicles towards touchdown.

"Lithos, this is Overlooker damaged requesting landing and rearming clearance at Land ways, over," I initiated contact.

"Roger Overlooker damaged. What's I.F.F. for today?" Asked the tower command.

We all entered the IFF codes we were given moments before our departure.

"Confirmed Overlooker damaged. You're clear for Land ways runway B-19, over."

"Roger Lithos." One after another, we touched down at the base while Pedro's stealthy TAV landed nearby. Within minutes we were swarmed by grounds crew whom were eager to find out about the action we saw. As they loaded Tosbow onto our planes, we all exchanged glowing reports of our activity against the rebel SFInFE trash. Due to operational security, the base knew nothing of our real identities.

Eighteen minutes later, we were loaded and ready to go. We took off and initiated a nominal escape and re-flew over the base. When we were at the location expected of us, we went "silent" and had our planes taken out of sight by Pedro's bullets. Then we headed for our individual targets as set out by our navtak systems, each of us on our separate ways.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

"...and the final tally is 534 for, 1 against. This nation is now at war," said the Vice President as he turned and looked at the President. He saw Tomar shake his head with an affirmation of the declaration of war. "Under the provisions of Croesus, you're all required to stay here for the duration of the war. This meeting is adjourned," said Thomas Cain as he slammed the gavel bringing the meeting to a close.

As the Congressmen left the shaft, Lee Roalnvoo was left with General Aloni and a few aides.

"General," began Lee. I personally know General Joeles. If what you said is true about his being in charge of the Overlooker Squadron, then I think we have a bigger problem than you realize."

"Oh?" Asked General Aloni.

"His real name is Paul Jaffrin. I think he might be a member of the rebellious SFInFE group. I've heard him talk, and he agrees with quite a few of the avowed principals they state," confessed Lee acting as General Walthers.

"How long have you known this, Major?" Asked Aloni obviously upset at this hidden knowledge.

"General!" Interrupted an aide before Lee could answer. "We've been hit!"

"What?" yelled Aloni and Walthers in unison.

"Land ways was attacked at Lithos eight minutes ago. There's nothing left," the aide's voice dropped off.

"Get me General Mely!" boomed Aloni.

"Yes Sir," said the underling as General Mely's red face appeared on the deskcom's plasma display.

"General Aloni, what is the problem?" he asked fearful of the result.

"General, where is your fighter squadron?"

"I do not know, Sir. We lost contact with it four hours ago or so," he confessed.

"Why didn't you let me know this earlier?"

"You know it's S.O.P. to wait six hours before writing a report," issued Mely.

"Did you know Land ways at Lithos was just destroyed?"

"Impossible, those planes weren't armed when they left here," protested Mely.

"General Mely, prepare to be court-martialed," promised Aloni as he cut contact and then called the President.

"Mr. President, they've made the first move. What do you think?" He asked after briefing him on the events.

Tomar was silent for a few moments before answering softly. "I think we're about to be checkmated in two moves." His Vice President sat down and thought about what his boss said.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

After leaving the Land ways at Lithos, I headed for my brother's house near Odin, Florida. When I was within a kilo, I began to land the hidden **Eagle** at his pad. After doing so, I egressed as expected and went to the door and rang Mike.

"Hey bro. How's it going?" asked my brother. "Was that you who made all of that noise?"

"Yeah, it certainly is a beast. Can I come in?" I asked hurriedly.

"Sure," he said as he led me inside his half spherical house. "So what brings you here?"

"I need a favor, Mike," I began.

"Anything man."

"I need to borrow a trans for a couple of hours or so."

"Hmm. I only have five. Which one do you want?"

"Lets see, how about that Ganymede Speedster," I bartered.

"O.K., but it's the best one I have. You'd better take damn good care of it," threatened Mike.

"Thanks Mike. I don't have much time, you know, its a national security issue," I lied.

"Sure, I understand. Here's the acom - you'll need it to access the commands," he said as he handed me the device.

I took his acom and called his trans to me. It was a beauty, the only prototype, and the fastest of the trans. The Ganymede Speedster of his was the envy of all fliers and I whom did not own one. I couldn't wait to try it out.

I thanked my brother and transferred some of the equipment from the P.O.L. to the trans. This was done out of sight of my brother, for him to see me load Tosbow onboard would have made him extremely upset. I parked the Eagle in Mike's garage, and told him to stay away from it - that it might still be contaminated with residue from the (auxiliary power units) APUs. Then I entered the Speedster, and harnessed myself in securely. I input the coordinates into the navcom and took off for my target - Washington D.C.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

Otto Tachabana landed his *Stiletto* within a half kilometer of a Hertz Rent a Trans business. After a short walk, he arrived at the automated dispatcher and inserted a EMS card given him by Louie.

"Which trans would you like Otto?" asked the machine in a feminine vocal.

"I'll take a Mead, if you have one available," he answered.

After a few seconds, the machine replied in the affirmative, and dispensed an acom.

"Here is your acom to access the vehicle. It' is a blue '51 Mead, in spot number 30. Your charges have been automatically withdrawn from your account. Thank you for choosing Hertz and have a nice day," it said.

Otto grabbed the acom and his ejected EMS card from the machine. Then he called the trans to him. He harnessed himself and flew to his parked vehicle. Then he commenced loading the Tosbow dispensers onto the rented trans. Minutes later, his task was complete. He loaded the coordinates of his target into the navcom and headed for his destination - Ottawa.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

Pedro flew his TAV to his home in south central Tulary, Mexico. Upon landing, he exited the craft and slid his way to his house. Once inside, he went to his library and called up his bullet program from his deskcom. He accessed the Gips and had the bullet program seek out the signatures of his, Otto's, and my trans'. When it found them, he ordered his virus to delete all references to the craft. He then tried to delete the pictobytes of the Stiletto's, but was unsuccessful. His task complete, he called me.

"Jaffrin.," he began. "I've completed the *editing* you requested."

"Good. Did you block the others?"

"No, I couldn't get inside the restricted zone. It seems like they've got their own subroutine or something," he guessed.

"Looks like it's up to us then, 'eh Pedro?"

"Roger that. We'd better get a move on it. The shit's about to hit the fan real soon."

"Yep, Jaffrin out."

Pedro broke connection and loaded the Tosbow dispensers onto his '27 Omega transport. After harnessing himself securely, he input into the navcom the coordinates of his destination - Mexico City.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

Lee was going over a list of possible targets we might hit, when his deskcom rang with a sensation of urgency. "Walthers here, what is it?" He queried the person on the other end of the conversation.

"General, we think we've found them," he said referring to our stolen planes.

"How?" asked a perplexed Lee.

"Easy. All we had to do was tie into Gips the signatures of each Stiletto (which we of course have on file) and have Gips display where they currently are, their previous track, and their predicted destination," offered the intelligence expert.

"Are all of them accounted for?"

"Yes Sir, including the missing Eagle and what appears to be a shadowing Tav."

"Good. Feed me the data, O.K.?"

"Sure," said the analyst as he fed the information to Lee's deskcom.

Lee called General Aloni and told him of the news.

"General, we've found them," he said excitedly.

"Splendid. Where are they?" he asked hopeful at the sign of an advantage.

"I'm sending their locations through now," said Lee as he did so.

"Thanks," said his superior as he confirmed receiving all of the file downloaded to him.

Lee acknowledged, and broke connection. A sense of joy swept over him with the knowledge that he might have just thwarted SFIInFE's plans. He called up the location of the **Eagle** I was flying. It was last seen at my brother's house. Lee knew I was a shrewd character, and he was worried about what I was up to. He called up a file on my brother and I and read them carefully. He needed to know how others in the government evaluated me. He did not want to be outwitted by a simple double agent like myself.

CHAPTER TWENTY

Dexter Semptat was flying as close to the ground as mechanically possible to avoid radar. His navcom instructed him that he was within range of his target. He switched his navtak system on and let it do the rest. The vehicle performed a standard pop-up maneuver and sprayed Tosbow over the city of Houston. After the job was conducted, the craft flew to the Houston Space Base twelve kilos away. Upon reaching attack range, the navtak system fired the plane's main armaments at the bunker where Tosbow was stored. It blew up explosively, a big green mushroom cloud vigorously rising.

His mission completed, he called the "Unifier" and told him of the good news. As he headed for base, his scope showed a bandit approaching rapidly. Dexter placed the cocom into the dogfight mode, and jinked his craft around, trying to gain an advantageous shot on the bogie. The bandit flew past him at a combined speed of Mach 15. Then the enemy pulled a tight twelve G turn and got on Dexter's tail. Dexter's lack of sufficient flight training was obvious. Suddenly, his plane began an uncontrolled dive to the ground below. He struggled to regain control, but could do nothing to counter-act the dive. From inside the cockpit boomed a foreign voice.

"We have regained control of our craft. You have two choices: return to base with me or crash and burn, pal," said the pilot of the other **Stiletto**.

All right, I surrender," gave in Dexter. The fighter ceased its dive and resumed a more normal flight eastwards. Dexter sat back in his seat, discontent with the idea that his plane was controlled from afar. After dawning upon the realization that his craft was being controlled via the acoms, Dexter acted to nullify the affect. Pulling out his sidearm, he shot the cocom where the acom gains access to it. The plane was uncontrolled again. For a few brief moments, Dexter didn't understand why. Then he understood what he had done. By shooting out the acom, he not only destroyed the ability of others to gain access to the flight controls, but he also destroyed how the pilot on board communicates with the cocom. With the link between man and machine gone, Dexter rode his **Stiletto** down to the ground in a scene reminiscent from Dr. Strangelove where Slim Pickins rode the bomb down to the target. You make the call as to whether Dexter was acting bravely or stupidly. He could have punched out (ejected) at any time during the fall.

Lieutenant Faber watched in horror as the Stiletto spun out of control, its pilot still onboard, and crashed into the desert ground below. He circled the crash site and took a few pictobytes to confirm what happened. Then he radioed to his commander an account of what happened.

"It's O.K. Lieutenant. I'm sure most of those rebels prefer suicide to capture. I'll bet their leaders have them so psyched up with anti-American propaganda, that they feel they're better off dead than read by the intelligence personnel."

"Should I inform the others of my squadron?"

"No. Let them face this on their own. You know, help them to grow up a bit," suggested the wing commander.

Faber broke connection and returned to base, his mission to take out the enemy finished.

Mike Jaffrin was watching the latest N.W.C.A. reports when he heard a noticeable rolling thunder approach from the west. He switched off the news tapes and went outside to investigate the noise. He searched the sky, but didn't see anything, so he returned inside to finish reading the forecast. He had barely turned the reader back on, when his house, the garage, and all of their contents were blown apart by two 2,000 pound laser guided bombs.

Louie was dreaming, hunched over his desk, about the mission, when a strange thought struck him. What if the Americans accessed the S.T.L.s through their acoms. Couldn't that result in them gaining control of the planes? He awoke abruptly as he confirmed to himself that possibility.

Accessing the latest Gips photos, Louie could see Dexter's **Stiletto's** remains. Continuing the process, he saw that every target of the fighters were attacked as planned, but that every S.T.L. had been destroyed. He had not heard from Otto, Pedro, or I for quite some time. He hoped we were all right.

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

Tomar Burton was having a problem getting used to the crampedness of **Sanctuary**. He had taken the proper dosage of medicine, but it did not seem to be working. So, it was not surprising when he viewed the pictobytes of the crashed S.T.L.s, the blown up house, and the contaminated cities, he promptly threw up. Ashamed, he excused himself and left for his private quarters, where he could puke in a more private surrounding. After vacuuming his excrement, the bell rang and the face of his Vice President, Thomas Cain, appeared on the deskcom.

"Come in," he offered as he quickly tossed aside the hose from the vacuum cleaner.

"I've got some good news Tomar. General Aloni has canceled Croesus. We're free to go," said the V.P.

"Good. I'll be happy to get back to D.C.," confessed the President.

"Shall I ready a Tav for your return?" queried Thomas.

"As soon as possible."

"Figure out what you're going to tell the public?" questioned his friend.

"About the T.S.O.?"

"Yeah."

"I haven't even given that any thought yet," he confessed as he fought to keep from puking again.

"From what I hear, the survivors are restless, if you know what I mean," warned the Vice President.

"Then I'd better start acting *presidential* and get back to D.C.," ordered Tomar.

The two of them exited the room and made their way to the waiting TAV.

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

Pedro had been doing recons of Mexico City for several days, awaiting the insect's advance. When they were within one kilometer of the city, he commenced Tosbow dispersion. The population below was decimated, creating a vacuum which the insects eagerly filled. His mission complete, Pedro headed for Libra Station, unaware that his craft was being tracked by secretly developed orbital surveillance assets of Space Command. Minutes later, his transport was obliterated by a quick pulse from an orbiting **Meteor** class battle station. He had less of a chance than the now dying Mexicans below him.

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

The President was busy rehearsing his upcoming speech when his aide interrupted him and told him he had two minutes to air time. Grabbing the disk with his prepared speech on it, he left the inner sanctum of his room and walked to the Blue Room, where the C.V. cameras were set up. Sitting behind the huge oak desk, he inserted the disk of his speech into the deskcom, and his words appeared on the TelePrompter for him to read. He awaited nervously the final moments before his broadcast. After a brief introduction by his Vice President, the signal was given for him to begin.

"My fellow Americans," he began. "I do not have to tell you that we are losing this last great battle against the insects. There have been millions and millions of you killed collaterally. The insects are within 50 kilos of the Capitol, and many of your democratically elected leaders have fled to safer locations. But I will not abandon the White House while still acting as your President and Commander-in-Chief. Before I get to that, I have to tell you why we are fighting this war."

"Not only are we fighting a war against the insects, but we are also fighting amongst ourselves for the first time in two centuries. I have seen the devastated cities of Atlanta, Chicago, Houston, Minneapolis, and New York. I don't know what to say, except that I am deeply sorry. We entered this war sure that we would prevail against the insects. We are ending this war with SFInFE and them united against us. Theirs is a noble goal, but because of what they stand for, our present form of a democratic republic is incapable of supporting their proposed system of rule. It would have been far easier if SFInFE had made allowances for retaining our system of government, but that is impossible..." he continued.

Lee was watching the President's speech when he was interrupted by a call from the Elysium.

"Walthers here. What have you got," he asked irritated at the interruption.

"We just completed our report on the Jaffrin bombing. Sir. There was only one body, that of Michael Jaffrin. We found the P.O.L. Paul was flying, but one of Mike's is missing..."

Lee's mind raced. Could I have been so sinister that I would set my own brother up, he wondered.

"Thanks Brewer, I'll get back with you later," he said

Another call came through his line immediately after disconnecting the previous one.

"Walthers here, what is it?"

"General, Mexico City's been attacked!"

"What?"

"Sir, according to the latest report from **Aurora**, a transport initiated a Tosbow run over the capital when the insects were within a kilo. The city's in the hands of the insects now."

"Damn!" was all Lee could think of, his mind overloaded with the scale of what was happening.

"At least **Aurora** was able to hand off to **Meteor**. The transport was confirmed destroyed," acknowledged Tu.

"Thanks Tu, I'll need a report later."

Lee leaned back in his chair, analyzing all of the data he acquired in just the last few minutes. Then it suddenly and horrifically dawned upon him what was about to occur.

"Get me the President, Flash priority double A," he prodded.

"...and it is thus that I formally declare my resignation from the Office of the President of the United States of America. Thomas Cain will be sworn in as the new President immediately following this broadcast," announced Tomar Burton.

Alan burst into the room and literally grabbed the President and yanked him out of his chair. "Let's go, no time to explain," he brushed off the former President's protests. They quickly made their way out of the room and headed for the Presidential TAV.

Flying down Pennsylvania Avenue, I was impressed with the beauty of D.C. I was not here to sightsee, however, for I had a solemn job to do. Louie LaSalle trusted no one other than I to accomplish the task at hand. As I flew over the White House, I could see three people running for a TAV. I commenced my run and dispensed Tosbow over the city below. The running men never made it to their vehicle.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

"...and that basically describes my part in the scheme of things during the war of '50," I narrated somberly, reflecting upon the great loss of life that occurred throughout the world as unity was brought to the planet.

"You may be seated," ordered the Judge.

I left the witness stand and sat next to Lee.

A few minutes went by as the Judge/Prosecutor/Jury deliberated my testimony. It seemed like an eternity to me. Then, with a look of intense thought on his face, the judge formed the proper words.

"On this second anniversary of the formation of the United Earth Foundation, we should all reflect upon the sacrifices that were made to bring the world into harmony. Not only are we better off as a species for adopting the principals as chartered in our Compact, but the planet as a whole is better off as well. Today, all life on Earth is represented in our Universal Congress. Our planet's biogenetic diversity is being restored. The environment is regaining it's health. The world standard of living has increased dramatically. The world population has been reduced to a more comfortable level of three billion. Hunger is an extinct condition. Fusion has brought power to the formerly undeveloped nations of the world. With recent advances in anti-matter propulsion, the solar system's resources are ours for the taking. The world's scientists are united under a common administration," the judge checked off the changes that have occurred as a result of the unification of the earth's nations into one homogenous society.

"We have people like Paul Jaffrin to thank for this accomplishment. As your leader, I felt it was time to tell the story of our founding," continued the judge.

Leader? The crowd was intrigued by the statement, as was I.

"Yes, I, Louie LaSalle, President of the United Earth Foundation, called this trial so that the true story of the birth of the U.E.F. could be told. Now we can begin humanity's next great challenge - the voyage to the stars" said the judge as he took off his robe and shut off a pseudo-facial projection. The judge became Louie, and the reporters stood and gave a standing ovation to him. "So on this second anniversary, I proclaim today an international holiday. A party will be held shortly afterwards. This 'case' is dismissed," he decreed as he slammed the gavel on the bench.

EPILOGUE

"You sure as hell had me scarred for awhile Louie," I confessed.

"Well how else was I to get you away from your jobs, have unlimited free media coverage, and still create an aura of excitement, intrigue, and tension," he offered.

"Speaking of tension, but did you see his face when he thought I was dead?" interrupted Lee.

"You're a good actor Lee. And thanks for participating in this. I know you didn't have to, but I think it added immensely to the realism to have the war told from the U.S.'s point of view," thanked Louie.

"And to think I nearly 'passed' on the opportunity," said Lee.

"Oh Paul, there's someone whom wants to see you," said our President.

The door opened and my heart nearly stopped. In stepped Cheryl, looking more beautiful than ever. We walked towards each other, quickening the pace as we neared. We wrapped our arms around each other and kissed with a pent up passion of two years waiting.

"I think I'll pass on the party tonight, I've got better things to do, if you know what I mean," I quipped as I threw a sideways glance towards Cheryl.

And with that, Cheryl and I held hands and left for my trans, whereby we left for many beautiful and passionate nights on Phobos.

Late in 2051, the first images sent back from a series of probes to the Vegan Star System were returned. I was among only a handful of people who saw the actual images, for what they contained will change the very fabric of humanity. The images indicated not only that there is life on the Second planet from Vega, but humanoid in form as well. With the discovery of life in another solar system, the UEF prepared to send a manned reconnaissance mission to Second. as the lively planet was called by us. This was all done in super secret, under the auspices of the solar defense act. It was to be so secret, that not even the crew on the spacecraft being prepared to travel to Vega was to know of the actual mission. The unifier did not want news of life being found in another solar system being leaked until we found out whether it was friendly or not. Given my stature and standing in the world community, I was drafted into being the emissary to the humanoids on Second and to attempt to establish contact. I gladly accepted the opportunity, and packed Cheryl and Joseph with me as we set off to the Vegan Star System, in late 2054.....

CHAPTER ONE

On the bridge of the *Phobos*, the new commander surveyed his surroundings carefully. The air was full of tension. Within three minutes the ship was scheduled to exit the wormhole and emerge near the Vegan Star System. The newly redesigned drive system has never been successfully tested. The normal series of unmanned testing prior to committal of humans was waived after four unmanned flights mysteriously ceased functioning following egression. It is hoped with a crew on board any problem which might arise will be dealt with effectively and quickly. Still, this journey was carried out only by volunteers.

"Two minutes ... mark," called out the navigator.

"Display the chrono on the screen," ordered the commander.

"Yes, Sir," came the obedient reply as the countdown was displayed on the main viewing screen. After the display showed one minute remaining, the commander called the propulsion specialist, Jack McCullum.

"McCullum here."

"Looks like the end is near, Jack. What are the odds?"

"Well, Marco, uh, Sir. At this point in time I 'd say our chances are the same as they were for the four other ships that attempted exit."

"Oh, thanks a lot," expressed Marco sarcastically. "Can' t we do any better than that?"

"Well, we 'll find out in forty - five seconds."

Throughout all of the habitat modules the chronos counted off the few remaining seconds. Five, four, three, two, one! Finally, the main viewing screen, which for three weeks had played in super slow motion, sprang to life.

"A.M.U.s realigning themselves," announced the navigator. Cheers erupted as the realization sunk in that they had made it.

"Damage Control? Anything to report?" asked the commander.

"Negative, Commander," was the answer everyone in the Command Module heard.

Marco was ecstatic. We beat it, he thought. But in the back of his mind, he was well aware that the other ships made it too, only to cease transmitting thirty seconds afterwards. However, forty seconds had passed with no indications of anything being wrong. "Well crew," he began, "it looks like we made ..." Marco's transmission was overpowered by a burst of static.

In less than a nanosecond, the entire craft was enveloped by various forms of electromagnetic radiation. Damage control programs struggled to cope with the energetic onslaught which was crashing computers left and right. As the systems were repaired and then promptly disrupted again, Marco could hear the damage control reports coming between bursts.

"Commdo waved...irrepa...cut - off ... soon as .."

It quickly dawned upon Marco the reason why nothing was heard from the other ships upon exit. Their destruction must have been because of the damage caused by exiting the wormhole. Somehow, he had to get word back to Moria that the new drive system worked, but the effects were detrimental to robot supervised missions. If only he could let them know, he thought as he slammed his fist on the armrest.

CHAPTER TWO

"Its been eight days ! I tell you they were destroyed just like the others. You're going to have to redesign those engines again Mario."

"You' re wrong Calpruni. Just because their report is two days past doesn' t mean you can write them off."

"He' s right Cal. We' re scanning the area now and we have not found the telltale neutrino emissions associated with the annihilation of a ship. On the other hand, we have the usual radiation emissions that accompanied the others."

"I. e., the fate of the *Phobos* is still indeterminate," put forth Calpruni.

"Right."

"O.K. So how much longer do we wait until we classify the results of the mission ?"

"Lets give them four more days."

"I agree. Lets tell Louie about our decision," announced Mario. It was agreed amongst them they would wait four days before writing the ship off. They hoped for a reply before then.

CHAPTER THREE

"It is ready Sir."

Finally, thought Marco. The communications torpedo (commdo) had been repaired. He hoped they had not given up hope back on Moria before it arrives. "Good. Send the torpedo through," he ordered.

"Torpedo away," confirmed Jack.

"How long before Moria receives it?"

"Assuming they're still looking for it, I'd say in three standard days."

"What are the chances the message we encoded will survive the exiting effects?"

"Better than they'd be if we hadn't taken the precaution of protecting the underlying circuitry and hardening the rest of the system. Given our chances were zero, I'd say the chances are infinitely better now than before."

"You're so reassuring Jack." The commander broke the conversation and addressed the Navigator. "Dahl, bring us around and proceed to Vega at norm speed."

"Yes, Sir."

When Marco was satisfied the ship was on target and making way, he returned to his quarters to think about the mission.

CHAPTER FOUR

"Axel, there is a small object about three A. U. away, heading this vector and coming fast," reported the monotone voice of a roboscan.

"What's the I. F. F. code reported?"

"Positive I. D. acquired and verified - it's from the *Phobos*, but the scan reads differently from any other commdo we have. Please stand by, there is a large energy build-up emanating from behind it."

"Please display the data," ordered Axel. When he saw the information, he was at once struck by its similarity to that observed when a ship exits a wormhole. Whatever the commdo was carrying, Axel was sure it was fried. Quickly, he called the recovery section and told them to pick up the now dormant torpedo. Within twenty minutes the torpedo was safely aboard the recovery vessel, and it began to divulge the information programmed in it by Jack. The crew notified Axel of its contents, to his elation. They had nearly given up on the *Phobos*. He had to notify his superiors of this immediately. Opening a direct line, he ordered the comlink to get him Roalnvoo.

Lee was busy dictating a letter to his wife, when his pocom informed him that Averly wanted him immediately in the command module. He gingerly made his way there and found Axel, Cal, Mario, and Base Commander Willos congregating around the main P. D. S., on which Commander Marco Catis' face was showing.

"Come on and get a closer look Lee, it just started," invited Commander Willos.

Lee walked over and watched the recording with interest.

"...three point one-four days ago. We have concluded that although the drive system works, the effects of exiting wormholes are detrimental to robot supervised missions because of the intense radioactive emissions following egression. It has taken us three days to repair the damage to the C³ arena. The propulsion systems are operative, but we are unable to move faster than norm speed. While the A. M. U. s are operative, they lost their bearing after the emissions and have not regained alignment. Only one repairbot is functioning, the others were fried. Though unbalanced, we are proceeding to the second planet as instructed. After we arrive, we' ll set up orbit and attempt to complete repairs. Once done, we' ll carry out our survey. By the time you have received this, and we hope we have shielded it enough, we' ll be half-way there. I'll

send another commdo when we arrive on station as planned. Until then, from the crew of the *Phobos* here are a few tantalizing pictobytes we took during the point - to - point transfer."

Thereafter followed several shots of the damage caused by the emissions. When completed, the P. D. S. went blank and the four stood in silence. Then Mario began to smile and chuckle lightly to himself.

"Well," he began, "at least we know the drive system works."

"True, but what causes the emissions ?" asked Commander Willos.

"I' m not sure, but it looks like it might be that when the ship exits the wormhole there is a tremendous amount of energy left over from the creation of the tube. We hoped the energy would dissipate as one exited, but apparently some of the energy created during formation is drawn in, exiting with the ship and emitted as E. M. R."

"That would explain the delayed effect then, as the energy released fell into the tube and came out shortly before this end of the tube closed," put forth Calpruni.

"Basically, assuming my theory is correct, yes. We' d have to do a scan of emissions to see if they were the same as the ones connected with the operation of the tube, " agreed Mario.

"And don' t forget everything would be severely red-shifted," exchanged Cal.

"But how are we going to do it ? There isn't another ship flight ready for six months or more."

"Why use a ship," countered the Commander. "In three days we'll receive one from the crew of the *Phobos*," he said speaking of the commdo. "I know they're the same as what we have in reserve. All we have to do is send a commdo somewhere, record the launch emissions, and compare them to those associated with the exit of a commdo."

"Yeah, I didn't think of that," confessed Calpruni.

"That is why you are the engineer and I am the *Commander*," quipped Willos.

"You know," interrupted Lee, "we don't even need to wait for their reply nor use one of our commdos. Axel recorded the emissions from the torpedo when it came through, so all we have to do is send one out somewhere."

"Actually, we don't even need to do that. If I'm not mistaken, commdos have in-flight recorders. If we played them back they should tell us about the whole phase of flight, thus answering our question without having to spend extra credits on hardware," offered Axel.

"Remind me to give you a promotion Axel, you've really earned it. Mario, how soon before you can get on it?" asked the commander.

"If I start now, I could be done within a half-hour. Once I understand what is going on, I can work on some way of reducing the emissions," he answered.

"Consider yourself in charge then. I expect to hear from you within the hour. The rest of you," he pointed to Lee and Cal, "have the day off."

CHAPTER FIVE

Theseus the XVIII was sitting on his throne, when the *Bearer of Arms* stormed in unannounced and requested an audience with him. Though occupied only with boredom, nonetheless, rules were rules. *Hendriks* was his best friend, and had it not been for his *Staff Bearer* at his side, *Theseus* would have ignored this most unusual behavior. But, if he didn't do as the "law" required he might be scorned. Well, on with the show then, he thought as he prepared to deal out the punishment.

"*Sir Hendriks*, why have you intruded upon this sacred flooring ?"

"Oh so Holy one," he begged as he bowed in appropriate manner. "Please forgive me my friend, but I bring exciting news of a new apparition from above."

"Rise and proceed," commanded *Theseus* as he traced the image of the Holy Symbol over *Hendriks'* head.

"My *Lord*, the *Predictor* has failed us again. The *Observer* reports a new star in the sky near *Jorgan*. According to her, its growing brighter and bigger."

"So he failed us again, did he ?" expounded *Theseus* with indignation. "*Eaker Random*, bring me the *Predictor's* head at once!"

The dwarfish *Staff Bearer* snapped to rigid attention and replied with the traditional response, " Your whim is my command." And with that, the stocky man left on his mission.

Theseus' mind returned to the problem at hand. "What does the *Observer* say about this occurrence ?"

"She says its like the four others she's seen earlier, only this ones moving towards us," answered *Hendriks*..

"To *Linnaeus* ?" *Theseus* asked disbelieving.

"That's what she says. And, according to her, at the present rate of growth, it should be as big and bright as *Xanthias* within three days."

As big as *Xanthias*, wondered *Theseus*. What message could the gods be sending now ? He had to find out. "Leave me *Hendriks*. I will address your punishment later. First I must contact my deity and learn more of this."

"Yes, my *Lord*," said *Hendriks* as he turned and left the room.

Satisfied he was alone now that the ever present *Staff Bearer* was gone, *Theseus* began to meditate. But try as he might, he could not contact his deity, *Searling*. Fine, he thought. You have tested me before and I have emerged victorious. I am ready if you choose to test me again. And then *Theseus* had a disconcerting thought. What if this message, and he had already decided that the new apparition was a message, was meant as a warning. Or, worse yet, meant as a punishment. What could he have done to deserve the wrath of God ? And what could he do to avert such wrath as it may choose? *Theseus* was confused. Once again he tried to contact *Searling*. This time, he was receptive to the request.

"What is it my son?" asked *Searling*.

Oh greatest of the gods, what has thee done to anger thou?

Searling let out a mental laugh. "Thou hast done nothing to anger thee. On the contrary, thou has done such good that I offer you a gift."

A gift ? What form does such gift that comes from the heavens take?

"*Theseus the XVIII*, it is time your people become enlightened. You have paid for your ancestor' s crimes long enough. I have sent you my best emissaries to teach you the proper way of things."

Are we doing something wrong? We do all that you ask of us.

"You do all right. But it is now time for better things." And with that, Searling broke contact.

CHAPTER SIX

"What the lo was that ?" exclaimed the Commander as the ship was struck by something massive.

"Asteroid!" replied an excited Ashford Thornbe. On the diagnostic panel, lights lit hyperactivity.

Marco loaded the damage control program and then asked it' s status.

"We have sustained a hit in the Z - 3, X - 8 propulsion module, exiting through Y - 9, Y - 11. The area is sealed according to program," replied the feminine voice.

"How soon before we can move?"

"The drive system can be made operational within twenty - one standard days, assuming each repairbot works around the clock until then."

What? Did that stupid program say "each" repairbot? Didn' t anyone bother to program in the demise of three out of the four 'bots? The Commander was upset, but tried not to show it. "I would like to bring to your attention that only one repairbot is functioning; and that at a depressed rate," he informed the DamConCom (or known as the damn com).

Within two seconds (a long time for a computer) it gave its reply. "Given the new data, the repairs will take 49 days with human assistance."

"Speaking of humans, when can we rescue those trapped in the aft section?"

"The six surviving humans can be rescued in two days, however, eight of your units are no longer functioning."

Marco slammed his fists on the membrane and lashed out verbally. "Damn it' s insensitivity. Thornbe, she' s your pet, reprogram it' s insensitivity mode, and while you' re at it, bring it current on all matters."

"Right away Sir," he said as he "pulled the plug" on the unit and went about the business

at hand.

"Dahl, what's our current heading?"

"We were on course for a standard orbit around Second. Because of the collision, we gained some angular momentum in the wrong vector. In other words, we're on a collision course with our intended rendezvous."

CHAPTER SEVEN

The Inn's owner surveyed the motley group who were enjoying shelter from the rain. He recognized everyone as being the locals, and this satisfied him. At least they'll only be the usual trouble tonight, he thought as he remembered last night's happenings.

He recalled the two strange men who sat near the door when a black knight from *King Tristan's* Army entered the room. Everyone, including himself, ducked under and behind tables and chairs. He watched with fear as the two men rose to leave, against the wishes of the Knight who took out his broadsword and challenged them. The two laughed and threw a burning nugget onto his dark robe, igniting it. Throwing his robe off, he dropped the sword and displayed a dagger, which he promptly threw at one of the men. He wounded one. The accompanying man, bent on vengeance, pulled out a bottle of clear liquid, lit it, and flung it at the knight, enveloping him in a bright blue flame. While the knight thrashed about trying to put out the flames, the fire-thrower picked up his companion and carried him away. The Innkeeper had brought out a pump and put out the fires the now dead knight had started while rolling around. The Innkeeper looked at the dead body and tried to move it, but it stuck to the floor. It took him several hours to remove all traces of the victim, and he could still in his mind see the burnt body. So when the door opened and in stepped a foreigner, he was obviously concerned.

Ignoring the unfriendly stares of the Innkeeper, she sat alone at a table in the corner of the room. She faced the door, of course. The bartender cautiously walked over to her and asked her if she wanted anything to eat or drink.

"I didn't come here to patronize your Inn, Mack. I only came here for a meeting," she growled.

The Innkeeper was alarmed. That was exactly what one of the men last night had said to him. From the looks of her, it looked like she would be as capable of dealing out such actions as they. He decided against forcibly throwing her out.

"The names *Joenesle*, and we have a rule here - No eat, no seat. So, what are you having?"

Faced with no choice, she acquiesced and ordered some wine. *Joenesle* retreated to the bar and poured a goblet of wine for her. He shorted it, then brought it to her, hand outstretched over the glass. She reached for it and he pulled back on the glass.

"They' ll be no trouble in here, you hear?" he asserted.

"Right."

"I' m glad we could come to an understanding. That' ll be one silver," he asked for payment.

She felt in her pocket until she had the correct change and paid him. Upon receiving his payment, he let go of the glass and returned to behind the bar, careful to keep an eye on the stranger sitting alone.

Quietly sipping the wine, she reflected on the events that led her here tonight. First, the four events in the sky, and now this one. This one was different. This moved. Being friends with *Sir Hendriks*, she had been telling him daily the new light's progress in the night sky. Un-expectantly, the path had changed and the object seemed to pick up speed. Taken together, those two events frightened her enough to call for a personal meeting. Not that it was unusual. They have had many "personal" encounters over the years. He was the first to make love to her, and they have continued to long past where others had kids. Before she met him, she was nothing. A product of a victorious invader and her peasant mother, she was an outcast from the start. She knew early in life she would have to rely on herself, so she left home and worked in town as a maid. She even had time to go to school and learn how to farm efficiently. But it was not

enough. There was something missing. She was alone. With so much time on her hands, she often spent nights looking at the stars. After a while, the stars became her friends, and they fulfilled all her desires. All but one that is, and *Sir Hendriks* "filled" that one nicely. But that was before *Theseus* Knighted him.

When she was half through with her wine, in he walked, wearing the oddest flower she had ever seen. Stealthily, he sneaked past the Innkeeper and sat next to her.

"Hi *Margie*, what's the news?"

What a let down, she thought. He was all business and no pleasure today. Why if she got her hands on that *Theseus* she'd take his knight away from him, she mused.

"You know the apparition I told you about?" she too became serious.

"Yes."

"Well, its changed course and picked up speed. Its hea.." She stopped mid sentence as she saw the Innkeeper walk briskly towards them, and from the look on his face, he was not happy.

The Innkeeper could not believe it. He put guards outside to make sure he didn' t come back. He didn' t want trouble tonight, especially after last night. "Look you," he stood imposingly over *Hendriks*," I don' t want you in here, not after last night."

Hendriks knew what to do. He reached in his pocket and pulled out a jewel and gave it to the Innkeeper. "*Theseus the XVIII* gave this to me personally. I think it should pretty well cover the damages I caused last night with that bottle of fire water."

The Innkeeper was taken aback. Never had he seen such beauty. Turning it over and over, he could not formulate the proper response.

"I think thank you is in order, *Joenesle*," suggested *Hendriks*.

The fog cleared and the Innkeeper graciously thanked him and told him he was welcome anytime. Once he had left, the two continued their discussion.

"As I was saying, the object, and I' m sure it is an object, is heading directly at us, or rather you."

"Me?"

"Not exactly. Actually, its aimed almost directly at the *Cathedralis*."

"Are you sure?"

"Yes. I have looked at it through the artifact and have seen details where there were none before."

Theseus would not like that, thought *Hendriks*. "When will it hit?"

"Looks like in about a day, give or take a few."

"Right," he laughed. "That sounds like something *Predictor Ray* would say. Seriously, when will it be here?"

"Tomorrow afternoon."

CHAPTER EIGHT

Marco and the crew were in a fatalistic mood. With the repairbot and nineteen engineers working overtime, they had been unable to repair the emergency engines let alone the maneuvering ones. Marco looked across into empty space. Most of the initial damage from the emissions was repaired. If it weren't for that damn asteroid we'd be able to orbit safely around Second, he acknowledged. But no. We couldn't do that. We had to be content with watching ourselves die. No wonder his crew were unruly. Thoughtfully, he turned on his deskcom. It promptly sprang to life. After waiting a few minutes to formulate his words, he began.

"Friends, this should prove to be my last message. We are now eight standard hours from impact with the second planet. We have repaired all initial damage, but we have barely been able to recover from an asteroid impact in the vicinity of the main propulsion module. That's the bad news. The good news is, as my last duty as Commander of the *Phobos*, I would like to take time to list special commendations for the following personnel: Steve Dahl - Navigator. It was he who suggested the idea of retrieving the post-egression pictobytes and using them to plot our vector after exit. He did a superb job of navigating the ship without A. M. U.s."

"Jack McCullum - the finest propulsion specialist around. It is doubtful we would have survived egression had he not redesigned the main engines."

"And finally, to Louie LaSalle, for offering to me the privilege of this command. We couldn't have hoped for a better leader for Earth in '50. I hope you win in '56."

Marco looked out his window at the nearing planet's landscape. A flash of light caught his eye, and he shut the deskcom off and went to the Observation deck for a better look. One of the geophysicists was looking through an imager at the first planet - closest to the star Vega.

"Can I look through that?" asked Marco.

"Sorry, Commander, but we're trying to image as much of the First as we can before we have to load the commdo and send it through."

Marco hated to have to use his authority, but he was sure he'd seen something. "As Commander of this ship, I order you to allow me to use that instrument for a moment."

The man gave him a disgusted look. "O. K., but Wittmar'll be mad if we miss any important geology on First."

Marco guided the instrument to where he thought he had seen something and he increased the resolution to one meter. The S. A. R. image was promptly displayed. They let out a gasp at what was displayed on the Plasma Display Screen. In the middle of the image was a rectangular structure, surrounded by several other structures, aligned with seemingly purpose around the huge central structure. Several walls of

some sorts bordered the structures, and there were blurred objects fading into and out of view. "Can you increase the resolution and compress the time more?"

The geologist did so, and they were taken aback by what they saw - two humanoids dueling with each other.

CHAPTER NINE

Sir Eaker Random was growing tired of *Predictor Ray's* behavior. He had been in his hut for nearly an hour, yet all the astrologer had done was give him documents that showed he correctly predicted the coming of the apparition. *Eaker* knew they were doctored. The color of the paper was different, and the ink was illegible, so *Ray* could claim it to be anytime he wanted. He had unsuccessfully tried to persuade *Ray* to see *Theseus*. It was time to use force. With the astrologer reading one of his entries, *Eaker* quickly drew his short sword and placed it over the man's head. *Ray* looked up and calmly put the book in his lap. With his unseen hand, he grabbed hold of the dagger his book concealed.

"*Sir Eaker*, what is the meaning of this unprovoked usage of force? Why if there were any witnesses around," he continued as he strolled out into the alley with *Eaker* at his side, "I could kill you."

Eaker glanced around and saw no one. "First of all *Ray*, there's no one here but us two. Secondly, I have orders to bring you to *Theseus*. And whose to say I don't chop your head off right now and tell him you tried to run away."

"I see your point," lied the tall man, still clutching his book and dagger. "That being the case, I'll follow you to the *Cathedralis*. I'm sure I'll have better luck with an educated man than with a neilsonian like yourself."

"No I will follow you, that way you don't do anything stupid," corrected *Eaker*.

"By your command," agreed *Ray*. The two began their journey through town. There were many people milling about. Perhaps enough to be useful, thought *Ray*. Then, unexpectedly, a fight broke out over some apples, and people ran to get a good look at the fight. *Ray* saw his chance. He withdrew the dagger and swung around, weapon outstretched. It clipped *Eaker's* midsection knocking him backwards in pain. Noting the dwarf was temporarily out of commission, *Ray* turned and ran as hard as he could.

It took several seconds for *Eaker* to recover, but when he did, he took chase against the fleeing enemy. Being shorter legged, he was easily outdistanced by *Ray*. *Ray* was so comfortable in his lead, that he could afford to make some delaying actions. A horse drawn carriage was trotting towards him. The *Predictor* spotted a nearby snake. He ran, grabbed the snake, and flung it in front of the horse. The horse saw it and bucked, afraid of the snake. The rider was thrown, and with the decreased weight, the horse

shot out and ran full tilt down the street, right at *Eaker*. He barely had the room to evade the charge. Regaining his composure, he searched for his prey.

Ray looked behind him to see his pursuer still in the race. Desperate for escape, *Ray* hopped over a tall fence, only to sprang his ankle upon landing. It hurt very much. Regardless, he had to keep going. Onward he limped, with the wounded *Eaker* closing fast.

Seeing his prey dart down a side street, the *Staff Bearer* remembered a shortcut from his youth. He veered into the local pub, ran through (much to the consternation of the pub owner), and arrived in the alley ahead of his game. Silently, this time he unsheathed his broadsword, ready to pounce on the unknowing victim.

Panting heavily, *Ray* stopped and looked around, not knowing just a few feet around the corner was *Eaker*. Slowly, he strode towards the corner, looking behind him for any signs of his hunter. As he turned around the corner, he was horrified to see the *Staff Bearer*, sword in hand and a grin on his face.

"You dropped this," boomed *Eaker* as he threw the dagger *Ray* used back to him. "Now then. Pick it up and fight like a man so I can chop off your head," he commanded.

Ray kicked the dagger aside. "I think not, for I have learned why you are Sir."

Eaker tied him up, fetched two horses and began the long journey to the *Cathedrals*.

CHAPTER TEN

Marco and the accompanying group were astounded by the fact that life existed on the second planet, let alone life in the humanoid form. While they did not at first believe it, the evidence from a probe fly-by confirmed the presence of life. The next step for the Commander was to establish contact.

"Hiroshi, I want you to contact the Second," he ordered.

"What did you say?" asked a bewildered Hiro.

"You know damn well what I said, now get me in contact with that planet !"

Hiroshi routinely went about the task of trying to establish contact with the planet. Orders were orders, he thought, even if they were insane. Everyone knew there was no one down there. Well, the poor commanders probably flipped, with the stress and everything, thought Hiroshi. After going through the entire range of frequencies he reported no joy to Marco. This distressed Marco considerably.

"Should I send another probe for a better look ?" asked the technician.

"Do we have any landers operational?" asked Marco.

"Yes Sir, we have two out of the original compliment of five."

"Good. I think we should try another landing on Second," suggested the Commander.

Then the full measure of Hiroshi's last statement was felt by Marco. If fuel were transferred from the probes and landers to the TAV, there might be enough fuel for several trips to and from the planet's surface. This would open the possibility that some might survive. But would it work? Is the fuel compatible? Is there enough time to implement it ? These thoughts and more were on Commander Marco's mind as he gave the order to fuel the TAV. During the fueling process, Marco had the somber task of determining who rode on the first, second, and possibly third trips. But when compiling the list, the computer kept over-ruling him. So he let the computer make the list, which in actuality was the only fair way of doing things. The computer knew no favoritism and hated no one. It could "stand back" and take an impersonal, logical, and correct choice. After a few minutes, the computer displayed the 27 people who would take the first ride to the planet's surface. Marco's name was first, but he declined the privilege and room was made for someone to go in his place. He declined more out of tradition than for real feelings for his crew. They were all volunteers, so no one would expect any favoritism. But he was the Commander. That made things different. Whoever said the Captain must go down with the ship should have been shot, he remorse as he began to distribute the computer results.

With only three hours remaining before burn-up, the TAV left for the surface, the first of its passengers aboard. Marco watched it leave until it was swallowed by the cloud covered atmosphere. Twelve minutes later, the Transatmospheric vehicle's navcom picked a decent landing site and began its final descent. Through the imager, Marco watched the sleek arrowhead drop rapidly and impact the surface. It was immediately evident to him that something went wrong. People could be seen leaving the craft, as a fire apparently started near the engine compartment. The ground cars moved rapidly away, and the transport flew out the top of the vehicle. A few minutes later, the hasty escapees rendezvoused twenty miles from the wounded ship. BOOM ! The TAV exploded in a brilliant explosion. To the remaining crew on board the *Phobos*, the explosion was too much. Many became angry and began "bouncing off the walls". Some killed themselves.

Marco sadly turned away from the view. Upon expunging his previous hopeful entry, he began anew.

"This is it folks. Twenty - seven of our compliment has successfully been evacuated to the planet. The *Surveyor* was damaged upon landing and apparently the main engines went critical. As you can see by the pictobytes I'm including, an explosion resulted, destroying the ship and the crew's hopes too. Some of the remaining crew have elected

to 'depressurize' rather than slowly fry. One person even outfitted a commdo as a one person rocket. I can only hope she'll make it, though I know she will not. In less than an hour we enter the atmosphere and die. I leave you with one final remark. There is life on Second. No, I don't just mean the survivors, but indigenous as well. I hope you plan a rescue mission soon. Some of the crew are unstable, and who can say what sort of contamination they can do. Of course, we already have contaminated them with fallout, and I'm sure some of our pieces will survive to further complicate the issue. I only have time to load the commdo with this program and of the pictobytes we took of the humanoids we discovered. May the Cosmos affect you positively." And with that, he loaded the commdo and sent it on its way to Moria. It was the last thing of significance that he did.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Theseus was not a happy ruler. *Sir Eaker Random* should have been back yesterday, but he was no where to be found. Nor had he heard from *Sir Hendriks Stone*. *Theseus* felt alone and scared. Earlier in the day, while he was out in the court yard going through his daily religious exercises, he looked up and saw a large ball of flame in the sky break up into smaller balls of flame, with each one trailing brilliant blue streamers. Some of them headed for him. He tried to contact his deity (whom seemed to be getting deaf lately), but to no avail. Quickly, he ran inside the *Cathedralis* and cowered in his secret shelter. Within minutes a loud double clap of thunder accompanied the shaking of his building. Shortly after, he heard the sound of rocks pummeling the roof. For over an hour the rain of hailstone sounding things continued. When it stopped, *Theseus* emerged to see what damage occurred. What greeted him were thousands of burnt pieces resembling obsidian and breccias. Again he tried to contact *Searling* but it would not answer. There was only one way *Theseus* could explain this strange event. He must have angered the Gods, or so he thought. And *Eaker* and *Hendriks* not showing up only served to reinforce his thinking. So when *Hendriks* and a female companion entered his chamber, *Theseus* was elated.

"*Hendriks*, you' re alive !"

"Yes, my *Lord*, amazingly we survived the Gods bombardment, having taken shelter under a bridge. Unfortunately, we arrived too late to warn you. The *Observer*," he pointed to his companion at his side.

"I am sorry we are late, for we were detained in *Triersville*," she apologized.

"That is understandable. I hear you predicted the course, but not necessarily the actions of the apparition we no longer see."

"Yes. We were on our way to warn you but we were too late. What have you done to incur such wrath?" she teased to the disbelief of *Sir Hendriks*.

"That is something even I do not know. What puzzles me is earlier Searling had told me of a gift. I can't see how bombarding us with rocks is much of a gift."

"Perhaps the rocks have some holy powers," submitted *Hendriks*.

"But of course. A gift from the heavens, spoken of by Searling. This must be the gifts," hoped *Theseus*. "*Hendriks*, please gather a few of them and bring them to me so I can test their holiness."

"By all means," *Hendriks* replied as he and the *Observer* set about the task of gathering as many rocks as they could.

CHAPTER TWELVE

Axel had been waiting expectantly three days for the scheduled commdo from the *Phobos*. Finally, after much frustration, the roboscan reported an object emerging near where one would expect an commdo from the ship. "What is the I. F. F. code?" he asked routinely yet excitedly.

"Positive I. D. acquired. It is from the *Phobos*."

"Send a recovbot to retrieve it," ordered Axel. "And connect me with Commander Willos and the others at once."

Lee was hungrily reading a letter from his wife, when his pocom informed him he was wanted by Axel Waverly. He paused the letter and granted link with Axel. Axe's joyful face appeared on the screen. Lee stared at him for a few seconds, wondering when he would speak. Lee was not in the mood for any interruptions at this point in time. The homesickness he felt seemed to be growing every day he was away from her. He was upset at not being allowed to pity himself in peace and seclusion. But, nonetheless, Axel was higher in rank for the moment, so he'd better find out what he wants, he thought to himself. "What is it Axel?"

"Lee, I've got good news. We've received the latest commdo from the *Phobos*. We'll be viewing it in eight minutes. If you want a good seat, come quickly. Commander Willos is already here, and Cal is on his way. Hurry."

"On my way," replied Lee. Filled with enthusiasm, he quickly ran to the command module. When he arrived, he found Cal had already taken his seat next to Willos. Lee sat next to Cal, leaving room for Mario. When Mario arrived, Axel began the tape. It was the first time any of them had viewed it.

After Marco Catis' last entry was displayed, the commdo showed the *Phobos* as it entered the atmosphere of Second. Then, as programmed, the screen showed a rear view of what takes place when a commdo enters a tube. Mario was happy to see particles left over from the creation of the wormhole flow into it after collapse. However, confirmation of his theory was not enough to overshadow the events portrayed on the screen. Even though the recording was finished playing, they all starred at the Plasma Display in utter disbelief.

Commander Willos was the first to break the silence.

"Axel, where is the *Sako*?"

"I'm not sure, but I can establish a beam with someone who knows," came the reply.

"Do so. Gentleman," his voice heavy with the burden of responsibility, "what I am about to do has never been done before, and it's politically dangerous. It is the only way I can think of rescuing the survivors. Moria is hereby placed on active duty with the S. D. F., as entrusted by President LaSalle. I now have the authority to order the *Sako* to rendezvous here on an emergency basis. Under the auspices of the Solar Defense Formula, we can use the *Sako* to rescue the survivors. Also, as a secondary mission, we can reach out and communicate with the life on Second. Third, we don't know how long the team can survive on the planet, especially considering they carry no weapons and the natives are obviously armed. We certainly would not want to create an interstellar incident with the first contact we make, would we? That will be the official story of what happened. Axel, you'll need to alter these tapes to corroborate my analysis. No one except for the President himself can learn of the real events. If reality sneaked into the picture, the *Sako* would not be available for another month. This way we can get it now."

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

The Commander of the *Sako* was reviewing the latest construction work that had been completed during the day. As Mars revolved beneath him, he could see the attempts at terraforming it were successful only at the polar ice caps. There was not enough water on Mars to supply the equatorial regions, even though weather machines had been set up to deliver moisture from the poles to the equator. There was even talk of building canals from the poles to the dry mid-section. If only Percival Lowell were alive in a few hundred years from now to see his fabled canals come into existence, thought the *Sako*'s commander. Phobos abruptly blocked his view, and he could see the effect of mining the little satellite. It was now little more than a third of its former size. The *Sako* itself was constructed out of raw materials scavenged from the asteroid. For nearly two years, the ship was parked in orbit around Mars. Now, nearly a half of a year late and three-quarters of a trillion credits over budget, the ship was nearly complete. Soon, Commander Rueben Hickel will guide the massive starship to other star systems, other worlds, and possibly other lifeforms.

Hickel's mood was quickly dissolved by the incessant purr of his deskcom telling him he had a call. He reluctantly connected the beam, and saw Commander Willos' face on the screen. Ruebens grey eyes focused on the older mans features. So, this was the son of a bitchin' Willos, he remembered of his former classmate and nemesis. Seeing Willos' wrinkled face, Reuben got the impression he was a dedicated man, otherwise he would have taken care of the wrinkles. Or was it just that at Pluto no one cared about how they looked, he wondered.

"Commander Willos," he began. "What is so important that you are calling me all of the way from the edge of the solar system?" he inquired.

"How much of the *Sako* is complete?"

"About 80 %. Why?" he asked suspiciously.

"Under the auspices of the S. D. F., I hereby order you to make 'space ready' the *Sako*."

Hickel was taken aback. The S. D. F. meant war, but who would Earth be at war with, he wondered.

"What is the basis for the emergency?" he asked.

"Commander," began Willos," the *Phobos* was destroyed as it attempted orbit around the second planet in the Vegan Star System. In the last message from Commander Catis, life was found on Second. We believe the lifeforms reported by him may have had something to do with the craft's destruction. Prior to its demise, a lander reached the surface, stranding sixty people. We cannot be sure that no harm has come to them. It is thus that I order you to proceed here at once to facilitate a rescue mission."

"Have you cleared this with the President?" countered Hickel.

"Well, no..."

"When I receive his approval," interrupted Rueben, "I will consider your request. Until then, this conversation and your potentially traitorous act never happened. Hickel out," he quipped as he broke the beam.

Louie LaSalle was a busy man. He hadn't anticipated being President would be harder than unifying the world. But it was. Immediately following the cessation of the arthropod/ humanoid wars in what used to be America, the new order spread across the entire North and South American Continents. That was easy enough. The hard part

was to get the rest of the world in on the process of unification. It had taken nearly another war to do so, but that was quickly averted when the "Nostalgics" saw fighters armed with Tosbow circling over their heads. Within two months Louie had successfully fulfilled his life long goal of unifying the Earth. Not only had he accomplished that, but he also made peace with a previously unrepresented form of life - Arthropoda. Once the arthropods were allowed in, the rest of the "lower" lifeforms clamored to get into the Congress. Eventually, the Congress had every species on the planet in its assembly, and the Earth was rapidly experiencing a change back in the way things were being done. The new order necessitated the requirements for more space stations, lunar cities, and even the colonization of Mars. Still, there was not enough room. So he turned to the stars for the solution to the Earth's overcrowding. Yet he was unsuccessful at reaching them. Four out of four attempts made by robot supervised ships "officially" failed. When the human crewed *Phobos* made it successfully, the entire Foundation was delighted. Louie would not only be remembered as the Originator and the first President, but as the best. He is the standard against which all future Presidents will be measured.

But Louie was also bored. He missed the excitement of the early '50s when the struggle climaxed into what is now the right course for Earth. He longed for a chance at a new adventure, and if it wasn't for Merri's persistent support, Louie would have stepped down only last year. This is on his mind when he was informed by his deskcom there was a top priority call for him. Leaning over to connect the comlink, he remarked to himself how everything nowadays seems to be priority one, even calls to ask for a new toilet on Europa.

"President LaSalle. What is it?"

"This is Base Commander Scott Willos of the Moria complex. We have an extremely urgent problem with the *Phobos*," he began.

"Yes, go on."

"Sir, I regret to inform you, the *Phobos* ceases to exist."

"What," Louie could hardly believe his ears.

"It plummeted into V -2 and broke apart upon entry. But that is not the real problem, Sir,"

"No?" he gave a confused glance towards the screen.

"No Sir. There's life on Second. Twenty - seven of the crew escaped prior to the destruction of the craft. But that's not all. There is indigenous life as well. And, its humanoid in form."

Louie displayed a false shock. "You're not serious are you?" he asked cautiously.

"Yes Sir. I hope there is no contamination of the planet. But look at it this way, its a two way transport. We carry germs they're not used to, just as they carry germs we're not adapted to."

"I will not be responsible for planet - wide plague. Who allowed contact to be made?"

"Commander Marco Catis, and we're not sure contact has been established yet... Besides, he stayed on board when the ship fried."

"Hes lucky he died or I'd kill him myself. Didn't he know there is a law against contaminating a planet?" Reviewing everything he heard in the last few seconds, he came upon the only real choice he had. "Commander, I will get the *Sako* space ready for a rescue mission. Of course, it will be the planet that we will be rescuing rather than the crew members. Its time to invoke the S. D. F."

"Yes Sir. And what are my duties?"

"Call Commander Hickel and let him know I'll be calling. I hate to talk to people who are unprepared."

"Yes Sir," replied Willos as he sent warning to Rueben.

Left to himself, Louie looked out the cabin window at the revolving Earth below. It looks so peaceful from here, he thought. Yet only six years ago the war of 2050 was fought, with him as the principal catalyst. A feeling similar to the one he felt just before commencing operations in the opening moments of that battle began to swell inside him.

Yes, he thought. I am ready again, for a new and exciting challenge, just like back in '50. And who else would he chose to accompany him but none other than Merri, whom he immediately contacted through his deskcom. On the screen was displayed the outworldly arachnid and his mental patterns. "Good morning Merri," he began.

"Hi Mr. President. What can I do for you?"

"Guess what," teased Lou.

"I don't know."

"Don't you miss the excitement of the early '50s?"

"Yeah, I suppose so, at least up to the part where I got into the duel with the black widow Weber. My appetite for adventures was quenched after that escapade."

"True, but didn't we fix you afterwards?"

"Yeah, you've got me on that one. Actually, I do miss the thrill of it all," he confessed.

"Well, how would you and a couple of other veterans like to go on a long cruise with me to Vega?"

"Why?" asked Merri, his curiosity peaked.

"Because Merri, I feel there may be much repression there, just as there once was here."

"What can I do about it? I'm not a member of any community there."

"Neither am I, but we did it here, I'm sure we can do it there."

"I don't share your optimism Louie, but its obvious you're troubled by something other than what you're telling me. If its any consolation, you can count this spider in, no matter what the problem."

"Thank you buddy, I knew I could count on you."

Merri sprang off the viewscreen, ending the conversation. After watching him leave, Louie called the Specanner of Congress, Jarri Talea. Wthin seconds, the Indian woman's face peered cautiously from behind a desk, then exploded into full view as she recognized the Presdent.

"What can I do for you Mr. President," she asked eager to help.

"I want to convene an emergency meeting of Congress immediately."

"Why?"

"I am enacting the S. D. F."

"Right away, Sir," she said with a sense of urgency in her voice. She disappeared from view for a while before returning. "Mr. President, its all set. The Third Congress will tele - meet at 1429. Can you give me a clue as to what will be on the agenda?"

"Certainly Jarri. There is life on V-2, and through an accident, some of the crew are stranded on it. Tearle's there, and you know how unstable he is. I hope Paul can counter Tearle's dictatorial tendancies. If not, we may find Second under his control. We need to be prepared for that. To do that, we need force, and the only way force can be brought is by enacting the S.D.F."

"I understand. Well, we'll be waiting for you," she expressed, concerned about the developments at Vega.

Louie leaned back in his chair and pondered the likely reaction of Congress. Al would ask why we didn't arm the ships in the first place, he thought. Baumgartner would ask why Tearle was allowed to go in the first place. On and on he went over each member's possible reactions, thinking of what strategies he should employ to disarm his political enemies. And then there was myself - Paul Jaffrin, the only person on-board the *Phobos* who knew about the true mission of the team. What role will I play on Second. I had served well during the war, and was chosen personally by Louie to lead the contact in a proper way. But that was first to be done from a distance, and only after much orbital scrutiny and private consultations with Louie. How will I react in close quarters with them, and under such time compression. And unsupervised? Louie had little time to think about the matter before his chrono announced he was due at the meeting. Oh well, he thought as he rose and floated through the corridor, better late than never.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

He had observed them for nearly eight hours before reinforcements arrived. While standing guard earlier in the day, he heard a loud whoosing sound and he moved towards the general vicinity to investigate the matter. It was not long before he found some thirty people huddled together around a large metallic structure. Upon observing them, he knew something was not right, as they wore no armor and were clothed differently. Only Jorganites didn't wear armor, and no one bothers with them because they're Jorganistic, he reflected upon prior knowledge. But they didn't look like typical Jorganites, so he called for backup. Now they were here, it was time to strike. Silently, he passed word to his troops to spread out in an attack formation. When everyone was in place, he struck.

I was organizing a work detail when the attack came. From a full 360 degrees dozens of projectiles sailed towards us. "Inside!" I barked as I dropped the tent I was assembling and ran for the safety of the ground car. The ones near the edge of the perimeter we had set up were not so lucky as to make it inside. One crewman was hit and died quickly. Four others appeared wounded, and as I closed the door, I could see Hiroshi unharmed and running for the door.

As he reached the door and began beating on it, pleading to be let in, I was caught by indecision. Should I open the door and let him in, exposing the interior to fire, or should I let Hiroshi die, sparing the remaining survivors from his probable fate. My indecision, brief that it was, cost him his life before I could open the door. When I again looked out, I saw the natives dressed in Medieval looking clothing. They appeared from the forest and dragged the wounded personnel into the woods. He had been my friend, I remorse. Quickly, I reviewed the events of the last few seconds. After doing so, it was

apparent to me that I was at fault. When there is a fault, there is a problem, and when there is a problem, it must be solved. I decided to hold a congress to address the problem.

"Crew," I began. "We have just been attacked by elements of the native population. Their actions show them to be hostile, if not down right aggressive towards us. I think we ought to call a congress and address this problem. Members of Congress, and that means all of you, the first issue I'd like to bring up for discussion is that of the Presidency. I was appointed temporary commander until the second load arrived, which obviously will never happen. Many of you, I'm sure, feel this means I was not meant to remain in control, and I tend to agree. Once this forum is over, I will give you a chance to elect a new President, should you choose to do so."

"The second topic is that of the recent attack. Although I served in '50 as a major figure, I have no experience on the battlefield. Rather, mine was in the sky and in the minds of the enemy. I would like, therefore, a volunteer to be responsible for the defense of the group. Has anyone had military experience?" I asked.

After a long wait, someone finally rose their hand.

"And who are you?" I asked.

"The names Tearle Durko. I have no experience per se, but I have some from down on the range protecting my stock from rustlerbots."

I knew that was not true, and that in reality he had quite the military experience. But it was on the losing side, and I could understand his not wanting to reveal his inglorious past.

"Good. Your self nomination is up for vote. Well, what'll it be congresspersonnel?" I asked for a vote. I watched as the votes were displayed on the libcom. When the last person was through voting, I announced the results. "The final tally is in. Tearle, you have the confidence of 90 % of the people. I wonder about the 10 % whom did not vote though," I quipped angered by their apathy. Tearle looked quite pleased and began to ask recruits for his new "army".

"Do you have anything you'd like to say Tearle," I asked.

"Just one - what do I do for weapons?"

"Thats a good question, and if you were alert, you'd notice I'd completely avoided that aspect. I assume you've guessed the reason for this?" I countered.

"I fear there are none," he remarked snidely.

"Exactly. You know full well its illegal for a starship to carry weapons, or anything that can be misconstrued to be weapons. So, if I may be sarcastic, *you* have a problem."

"No shit," he expressed, disgusted with the situation.

"I'm glad you understand. Now then, and sort of along the same lines, I have something else we all must address. We may have a problem with the authorities - that of contamination. One: we are here, and that is bad enough; two: we have unexpectedly just made unauthorized contact with the native life; three: And worst of all, the contact was not of a peaceful nature; Four: they dragged away four of our fellow crewmembers. One can only guess at what they will do to them and their *utensils*; Five: there was probably great amounts of fallout from the *Phobos* as it entered the atmosphere. There is a definite possibility the debris is highly radioactive. We have to clean it up and keep it from destroying the ecosystem. This means we'll have to move towards the other side of the continent where she entered and presumably her remains lie. The lander isn't going anywhere. Therefore, we have to move by ground, which increases the chance of further unauthorized contact. That's where Tearle comes in, and I leave with him the responsibility of dealing with it. There, I've said enough. Now lets get on with the process of electing a REAL President. I will leave that to you. I'm going to rest." And I stepped out of view and went to my deci, where Cheryl and I went to sleep.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

It had taken more than eight hours for the debate to end. Much of the delay was caused by the length of time required for the transmissions from other chambers throughout the solar system to arrive at the main Congressional Station, orbiting Earth. Lee was nearly in excommunicato because of Moria's distance. Moria was the farthest outpost occupied by humans, and it takes nearly four hours for a signal to reach there from Earth. Still, he was required to vote on the issue, and vote he did. The proposal to "rescue" the natives was passed by an overwhelming 94 %. It was decided to ready the *Sako* for flight within two weeks. But that was the easy part. The debate over arming the ship was quickly taken up by the "rapters" and "nectars".

The Compact expressly forbid any transport of weapons on any ship that intends to leave the solar system. Al Severly immediately lobbied for a Compactorial Amendment to allow for such cases in emergencies such as this one. He was hotly opposed by Lulik Sokako. The calm professional manner of assembly soon degraded into a shouting match between the two, and the Specanner had to step in and quiet things down.

"Stop it, both of you!" she screamed.

They immediately ceased upon hearing this most uncharacteristic of outbursts from her.

"Mr. Severly," she began. "Please, in one paragraph or less, explain why we should amend the Compact," she instructed as she tried to establish some order.

Al, knowing he was in full control, stepped up to the C. V. and addressed the Congress as a whole. "My fellow delegates - both present and comlinked, we have a problem on our hands. I feel it is possible that two scenarios could be occurring at this very moment on Second. The first is the possibility some survivors might be in trouble. Remember, we saw the tapes, and it's obvious the natives are armed. Therefore, we may need to bring weapons to show our power so they will respect us and allow us to first rescue our crewmen and then to go about the whole matter diplomatically."

Boos erupted from some in the chamber.

"The second is the possibility that the survivors have allowed themselves to be thought of as Gods, and may be able to subvert the population and cause major disruptions of the society, and possibly the initiation of hostilities towards one another. Remember, Commander Catis said there were some 'unstable' personnel down there. That is why we should amend the Compact - to carry weapons enabling us to deal with whatever is going on there," he finished.

"Thank you Al. Lulik, the Specanner recognizes your turn."

Lulik rose and addressed the Congress.

"Members of Congress, most of you were in attendance when the Compact was first written. I dare say at least 3/4 of you helped write the Compact. You know the spirit and fortitude with which it was written. To amend the Compact with this provision would violate the original intent of it. I foresee a future where if this proposal passes, all of our ships will be armed as a 'defensive' measure. Yet as Al says, there are 'unstable' people out there. How are we to be sure that someone won't use these weapons for their own purposes. And think about this - what if we were approached by some other spacefaring civilization's spacecraft that bristled with weapons? Wouldn't you be wary of their intentions? Think what it's like to be on the other side of the sensights. We just fought a destructive war four years ago and I'm not sure all of you know how it feels to be bombed, sprayed, and starved. I ask that this proposal *not* be passed as it is currently written, but that appropriate safeguards be emplaced."

"Thank you Lulik," said the Specanner as cheers spewed forth from the chambers. "You have heard these two debate for quite some time on the issue of arming the ships, as well as their respective summaries. I ask that we now vote on the proposal as written. After casting your vote you may recess until all other votes are in. You may begin now."

That last line took Lee more than four hours to receive. Knowing it will take an equally long time for his vote to be received, he calculated there will be a nine hour recess for those in the Congressional Station. As he was thinking about his decision, he

wondered what the delegates were doing during the lull. Then he remembered how it was during the war. When someone motioned for a recess, it was usually granted. What followed were parties of almost un-believable proportions as they tried to relieve the stress of war. Then, when they came back they were so tanked up they couldn't consciously vote, so it was postponed until a latter date. Things are different now, he thought. More professional.

Lee identified with Lulik's position, and he felt it was the right intent, especially since he knew what it felt like to be on the receiving end of a laser. On the other hand, Al did have a few good points. Who knew what kind of weaponry the natives might have, and who is to say they can be reasoned with. A show of force might be the only thing they understand. He agreed with parts of both arguments, but neither were the answer. So he cast a no vote in the hope that something better would arise - complete with the safeguards that Lulik wanted and the weapons Al wants.

Four hours later, Jarri took her usual seat as Specanner of Congress and made the announcement. "The final tally is in. Al's proposal has been defeated by a nar..." the rest was drowned out by cheers of glee and moans of anger. Then, unexpectedly, the Vice President of the United Earth Foundation floated to the compulater and waited for the Specanner to recognize him.

"Members of the Congress, it is my distinct pleasure to introduce you to the Vice President of the U. E. F., Merri."

"Thank you Jarri," translated the Compulater for everyone to hear. "I have witnessed this debate rage back and forth between Al and Lulik. I would like to see more participation from the rest of you. It appears that many of you don't hold much importance to this proposal because in all likelihood we will go to Vega with weapons - with or without an amendment. Therefore, you can assume that any proposal will do. Then, when it shows it's flaws, you think changing a sentence here or there will alleviate the problem. WRONG! Why do you think the revolt of '50 was so popular? It was because of ineffectual congressmen who failed to address the problem correctly. This will stop, and it stops now. Whether you realize it or not, the Compact must be amended - and any amendment allowing for the transport and possible usage of weapons will have unforeseen implications for the future of the U. E. F."

"I have just come from a meeting with our President, and we feel we have a viable solution to the problem at hand. Many of you won't like it, but its the only way out. Under the Solar Security Act, we can put a loop on anything that we don't want to be leaked to the public for seventy years. So anything contrary to our stated intentions can be deleted and delayed. Now then, what will be expunged from the Congressional Record?"

"Under the Solar Defense Formula, a State of Emergency can be declared, suspending the articles constricting the solar defense. So, if we declare an emergency, but keep it

in a loop, we transport weapons to Vega without anyone knowing of it. Hence our problem is solved."

It took awhile for the full implications to sink in, but once they did, the chambers erupted with cheers and they rose and gave Merri a standing ovation. Merri was obviously pleased by the result and he scampered to his normal location next to the Specanner.

"You have just heard a remarkable proposal from a remarkable arthropod. It is clear to me that you like his recommendations and that that should be the course we will take. There is one final problem - which of you will NOT be going to Vega?" she asked.

No one made any motion to say they were not intent on going.

"It is unanimous. We leave tomorrow," and with that the Third Congress was drawn to a close.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

He had been traveling for half of the night before he and his henchman arrived at the brilliantly lit *King Tristan Pytels'* castle. He carried with him four captured prisoners from the newly settled territory he guarded. The potion worked well on all but one, whom he had to club to subdue. He was fearful he had killed her, and he knew what punishment that would bring from Akbred.

Akbred was the chief interrogator for the King. He wanted only alive and alert prisoners. Anything else and he could not get any useful information from them. He arrived at the gatehouse, trepidation rising inside him.

"Halt! Who goes there," shouted a sentry.

He stiffened his back and proudly proclaimed, "It is I, *Sir Cadmus - Hunter for the King.*"

"And who are the other eighteen?"

"They are my henchman and four prisoners for *Akbred.*"

"Very well, you may proceed," granted the guard.

As *Sir Cadmus* trotted past, the sentry bowed appropriately. When the last henchman passed, the guard resumed the position of rest he had held prior to their arrival.

Sir Cadmus was very hungry from all of the traveling he did, and this made him anxious to meet *King Tristan*. So when he battered down the door to the King's reading room (Yes, the King could read), it was not entirely without reason as he was denied entrance.

The King did not see it that way though. "Whats the meaning of this, peasant," he bellowed. "I'll have your head if you don't start talking!"

Cadmus was shocked at himself for not thinking before acting. "I am sorry my *Lord*, I do not know what possessed me to do such an evil act," he laid it on thickly.

"Fear not then my son," comforted *Tristan*. "We shall have you exorcised at once."

"Thank you my *Lord*. I bring four outsiders and news of a new keep being erected by them inside your newly acquired territory."

"Have *Akbred* analyze the prisoners at once," he commanded. "Oh, and your payment is in the room, where they normally are," offered the King.

"Thank you my *Lord*, but I am famished. May I eat something before I accept payment?"

"But of course. How discourteous of me not to offer food before such sport. Follow me and I will show you the dining hall." The King rose from his throne and headed for the door, Sir *Cadmus* and his motely crew following behind. The dining hall had a large table loaded with food, before which all sat at their appropriate seats. After gorging themselves on the food, the King allowed some peasants to eat the scraps. There were plenty of scraps for them, and this made them happy.

Cadmus' dad was a peasant, and he knew what it was like to be fed scraps like a dog. That is why he ordered thirds for himself but did not eat them, instead leaving them to the peasants. After a brief encounter of the unfunny kind with the jester, the King and *Cadmus* got down to business.

"Come *Sir Cadmus*, what is the news about this new keep in my 'yard' ?" asked the alarmed King.

"My *Lord*, I bring news of a new armored keep that came from the skies."

"Describe this keep which you say came from above?"

"I heard a thunderous roar, followed by a sound similar to that which a castle wall makes when breached. I went to investigate and found a blackened armor keep of unusual design. There were many Jorganite people clustered around it, except they weren't the usual Jorganites. I sent for my Henchman and we attacked the invaders and got these four prisoners for *Akbred*. They carried these," he said as he pulled out some exotic looking things and handed them to his King.

After giving them a quick look over, the King came to a strtling conclusion. "These were made nowhere on *Linneaus*," he proclaimed.

"I agree my *Lord*. Their design and materials do not suggest a *Linneatian* origin. Certainly no one in your territory could have made these."

"I agree *Cadmus*," he said as he pondered the possibilities. "What about that heathen, *Theseus*. Could his people have done this?"

"It is possible, my *Lord*, though I doubt they could have built something with no appearant usage," he said as he held a power pack in his hands.

"Let me see that," ordered *Tristan*. He grabbed it and looked at it carefully. His gaze immediately fell upon the U. E. F. symbol emblazing the artifact. "See," he pointed to the symbol of the Earth and Moon, "there is your proof. It was made by that Neislo worshipper *Theseus* that I hate so much."

"But why is it in the hands of the Jorganites?"

"Sure, don't you see," asked the King as he formulated a reason. "It goes like this: *Theseus the XVIII*, as he so proudly proclaims himself, wants to defeat our forces of good. He knows he will loose because good always triumphs over evil in a fair fight. So he infiltrates my Kingdom with his Henchmen and equips them with the standard Jorganiustic symbols - that of *Linneaus* and *Jorgan*, so that he may attack me from within and under complete surprise. He knows I would never attack a Jorganite - no one does as they can never hurt anyone. All in all, a brilliant plan on *Theseus'* part; however, he overlooked one major variable - that I would find out about his plan and burn it with the rest of his silly attempts to convert me."

"Brilliant, my *Lord*," praised *Sir Cadmus*, fearful of agitation should he say anything negative. "So what do we do with these invaders?"

"Kill them," was the terse reply.

"For the *King!*" exclaimed *Cadmus* as he unseathed his sword and rallied his men for the two day journey back to the keep. Yes, he did get his "payment" first though.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

Ashford Thornbe had a terrible dream. He dreamt he had flown to the second planet in a probe, and that it crashed, leaving them alone on a hostile world. It continued in that he was organized as a work party to set up shelters when all of a sudden he heard a noise from the bushes. Thinking it might be a small edible animal, he went to investigate. The next thing he dreamt was that from behind a large tree a woodsman armed with some ancient weaponry fired at and hit him. Then he dreamt about being on a roller coaster ride for eighteen hours.

Accompanying him was a bad odor, one which continued to permeate his senses, even though he was now awake and the dream was over. When he tried to move, he

couldn't, so he slowly opened his eyes to see why. He was tied to the floor of a damp room, in which hundreds of insects scurried about. He closed his eyes disbelieving and told himself he was still dreaming. Again, he opened his eyes several times before accepting the fact that he was not dreaming. He glanced around the room quickly. The room was constructed of big pegmatitic granites formed into blocks and laid next to and on top of each other, creating a wall. Huge wooden beams covered with mold crisscrossed the ceiling. Before him was a huge metal door that looked like something out of the movies. He heard snoring to his left, and turned his head to see who it was. Vladimir Vitosky was tied and chained in a similar fashion, and he had what appeared to be an arrow of sorts broken and penetrating his right shoulder.

Ashford turned to his right and saw Chloris Nordaft also bound and having an arrow protruding from her left arm. Her clothes were considerably ripped, and with the material being what it is, it must have taken a sharp knife to cut them. Ashford hated to think of what indignity she might have been through.

Further past Chlo, as she was affectionately known, was Aradine Szigat, with, could it be, he wondered grimly. He looked away in disbelief, then looked again to confirm his sight. Aradine also had an arrow in her. But what happened to her head? It looked almost bashed in. Then he remembered the dream he had. Cautiously, he took a sniff of the air, and it confirmed his suspicion. He realized the smell that permeated his dream was the smell of death, and that it was no dream, rather, it was reality. He fought it, but threw up anyway, just to the side of his head.

The noise alerted the guard outside and he peeked in through the bars. Good, thought the guard. The prisoners are awakening. It was time to get *Akbred*. When he arrived, the guard gave his report.

"The second from the left is awake. And by the way, it stinks in there. Shouldn't you wear a mask?"

"Thank you for your concern *Chaben*, but I am really used to the smell. Please open it now." he commanded.

The sentry opened the door and let *Akbred* in. Then he closed it and locked it according to procedure.

Ashford heard voices outside of the door, and wished he had his pocom so he could translate what they were saying. Feeling for his acom, with which he could access his pocom by voice commands, he realized it wasn't around his wrist where it should be. Damn, they must have taken it, he thought. Just then, a short man was let into the room, and he approached Ashford. Asford demanded to be untied.

Akbred was distraught by the prisoner's strange speech. It is the tongue of Neislo, he thought, and only Neilso worshippers knew the language fluently. "All right you Neilso

wittness, stop that and speak our language or may your tongue turn to flame," he proclaimed.

Ashford was caught off guard. The language the little man spoke seemed familiar, but he could not understand it. Not having his pocom, he decided upon another avenue of communication - sign language.

Akbred was taken aback again. Not only did the prisoner continue to speak without his tongue burning, but he started making strange hand and finger motions. Oh no, he thought. He's trying to put a spell on me. He quickly took out his holy symbol and flashed it in Ashford's eyes. It had no effect, and he was not getting the information he needed from the captive, so he decided to place him in the state of all knowing. From beneath his robe he pulled out a vial of clear liquid and poured some in a mug, offering it to the prisoner.

Ashford was happy when the man gave what appeared to be water. Upon drinking it, he found the taste to be bland, and his tongue began to tingle. He tried to force it away, but the guy dumped it down his throat. He began coughing, and soon he was inundated by a spinning sensation. He soon lost consciousness.

While awaiting Ashford's return to consciousness, he noticed the woman to Ashford's right was awakening. "Wake up my dear, we have a busy day for ourselves," he said.

Chloris dizzily became conscious after an exhausting sleep. She tried to turn on her side, but found she was bound, lying on her back. As she became more conscious, she noticed a dull throbbing in her left arm. She opened her eyes and found herself in a dungeon of sorts. Then she noticed the smells. There were two of them, each very powerful, and she recognized both of them. She turned her head to her right and saw Aradine's badly mangled head. She screamed. She heard a loud laugh and looked to her left and saw a short robed man. "Who are you" she asked.

He was taken aback yet again. Not just one, but two spoke the strange language. He walked over to her and unbound her. He could smell the fear boil inside her. "Come my darling, let us clean you up from what that pig *Chaben* and his guards did to you," he made it look like he was comforting her.

Chloris didn't know what to think of the situation. She could not understand what he was saying, but she dismissed her inability to comprehend what he was saying because of the high probability she was in shock. After being untied, she rose and felt a sharp pain in her abdomen. The man motioned for her to follow and she did so, trying to show dignity even though what happened certainly was undignified and downright disgusting. She wanted to bathe, but judging from the look of things, she probably would not get the chance, she thought. She followed him through a maze of corridors, and as she traversed the castle she tried to mentally map the route. Surprisingly, as she walked her arm felt better. Still, the smell of the "gifts" that *Chaben* had given her body were quite pervasive.

After a long walk, they stopped before a wooden door. The man motioned for her to enter, and she did so. Behind her he locked the door, leaving her in the room alone. She cast a glance around and noticed a large wooden tub filled with warm water, and a set of clothes nearby. After waiting a few minutes to be sure she would not be interrupted, she took off her ruined remains of clothing, climbed into the tub and began the task of cleaning her used body.

After an hour the door opened and *Akbred* stepped in. Noticing she was in the robe he left for her, he assumed she was done. He motioned for her to follow and she did so. Again she tried to make a map of the route they were taking. She wondered where she was going. Her question was soon answered. Four guards stood erect before them, and they let the two into a room. On the far side of the room were the pocoms and other stuff they had. *Akbred* picked up an acom and handed it to her. "What is this?" he asked her.

She took the unit and put it on the shelf, exchanging it for her own acom. She then accessed her pocom, and after a long delay, the unit was up and running. Then she entered the compute program and put it in the teach mode. While the processor was running, *Akbred* picked up Aridine's pocom and started fiddling with it, trying to get it to work. When nothing happened he flung it against a wall, and it broke into many small fragments.

With the pocom now ready, she instructed it to translate what was being said. *Akbred* turned to one of the guards and told him he was leaving for awhile. Then he left. The pocom caught only a little of the conversation, but it was enough to get her started. She inputted into the computer that she wanted to ask the guard where the man went. The pocket computer did a lousy job of translating her instructions but it was good enough to get the guard's attention verbally. One guard asked the others if they had said anything, but none of them had. The pocom dutifully updated its dictionary and announced to Chloris what was said.

"What does speak you?" it voiced.

Putting the acom in the audible access mode, she told it to tell them she wanted to know where the little man went to. A short time later the pocom spit out her reply in the native's language. The sentry was surprised and he told the others to get *Akbred*. When he arrived, he found the guard and her carrying on a conversation.

"What is the meaning of this blasphemy?" he scolded the guard.

"She speaks," he explained, "but not by her own tongue - rather by that, " he said pointing to her pocom.

"What is that?" he asked. A few seconds later the question was repeated in her language. Then she answered and the reply was spoken by the box.

"What does it do?" he asked upon hearing the answer.

"It allows me to speak with you," she answered.

"Why can you not speak standard?" he asked quizzically.

"Because I am not from this planet?" she answered.

"What is a life sphere," asked *Akbred* confused.

"Basically, a planet is a large sphere that you and I am standing on. It is the ground you walk on, the seas you sail, and the air you fly, ...uh, breathe," she corrected herself.

You said *Linneaus* is a sphere. Surely you know it is not, unless you are a follower of that heretic *Nagas*. If it were a sphere we'd all fall off," he countered.

"Not if we were on top," she offered quickly.

"Oh, I hadn't thought of that," he conceded. "What are you doing in *King Tristan's* territory?" he asked trying to regain the initiative.

Chloris remained silent as she formulated her answer. "We were lost and we didn't know where to land- set up camp, that is, so we chose the first place we found. We did not know it was claimed by anyone."

"All land on *Linneaus* is claimed. Did *Theseus* send you?"

"Who?"

"*Saint Theseus*. He is a 'king' about six days travel from here. He calls himself a priest, but he worships *Neilso*. *King Tristan* and his ancestors have been fighting him for the last 16 generations."

"Why have they been fighting for so long?" she asked.

"I think I believe you now. You must be from a different place. Everyone - even the *Jorganites* - know of the wars."

"You did not answer my question," she continued.

"A long time ago *Lord Tristan Pytel* and *Theseus I* were allied together against a common enemy to the north. *Lord Tristan* instructed *Theseus* to attack and engage the *Evil Empire* while *Tristan* mobilized his forces for the final attack. It would take him six months to prepare his attack, so *Theseus* would take the brunt of the battle. After a brief skirmish between the *Evil Empire* and *Theseus' Fiefdom - the A. N. A.*, a stalemate permeated the battle. There were no further battles between the two, and *Lord Tristan*

learned of a treaty signed by the two. *Sir Tristan* became suspicious of that acolyte and made a treaty with a keep to the east of *Theseus*. One month later, *Theseus* attacked our ally. Our *Lord* was outraged and immediately drew up plans to attack the *Evil Empire* himself, with the invasion of the A. N. A. as a convenient cover. Three months later he invaded, and, to his surprise, when he raided the keep, he found the treaty between *Theseus* and the evil ones. They have been fighting ever since."

"What happened to the ally to the east?"

"Its pretty strange, but our history only tells us of the lead up to the conflict, the destruction of *Theseus'* territory, and a contorted vision of a pursuit of *Theseus*. It is as if there is nothing else than the continuing war with *Theseus*."

There was a long silence. Given the chance, Chloris changed the subject. "Why were we captured and held prisoner?" she asked.

"That my dear, is easy to explain as you will see for yourself. Follow me and I will take you to the dungeon. The potion should be taking its desired effect right about now."

"What effect?" she asked worried.

"You'll see."

Chloris followed him through the maze until they arrived at the room where she was held. *Akbred* opened the door and pushed her in and tied her to her holdings.

She struggled, but was in no position to do much about it. *Akbred* then untied Ashford, and led him to the room where their personal stuff were. Then he handed him the equipment, telling him to make it talk. Knowing he had to speak first, he started rambling about how fortunate Ashford was to be alive. Finally, he was told to shut up. This was not the thing to tell a man whose horse is tied to the branch you are hanging from.

"Who are you," asked *Akbred*.

"I am Ashford Thornbe, astrophysicist aboard the Phobos. My security number is 828 - 467 - 2290 - 01. I am 57 years old. I was born in Winchester England.."

"What are you doing here?" interrupted *Akbred*.

"We crashed trying to land in a safe environ."

"Who sent you," he queried frustrated.

"President LaSalle."

"Who is this King LaSalle?"

"He is the founder and President of the United Earth Foundation."

Akbred was growing tired of such nonsense. "Who is your *Lord* - your God?"

"We have no Lord."

What blasphemy, thought *Akbred*. *Tristan* was not going to like it when he reported that a bunch of heretics invaded his land. "Don't you have a God, someone who created you, who rules your life, who protects you and controls everything?"

"There has been no such word in the Official Lexicon since the A - Morale uprising of '38."

More blubbering, thought *Akbred*. Well, we'll just have to let the guards take care of you. He called *Chaben* and his guards, told them what to do, and he locked the five of them in with Ashford.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

I lie snuggling my wife while awaiting my fate. The Congress seemed to be taking a very long time to make up their decision about me. Finally, my pocom alerted me that a decision had been made.

"Paul, it is the majority's decision that you should be retained as Commander of this expedition."

I was relieved, and Cheryl sensed this as she hugged me lovingly. Still, I was sorry about Hiroshi, but I had punished myself enough. "Thank you Specanner - pro tempe. I'm glad the Congress felt it in their hearts to keep me as their leader. What did we decide about the contamination issue?" I asked concerned.

"We have decided the contamination was not our fault, that due to extenuating circumstances we were unable to prevent the acquisition by the natives of as yet unquantized technology. Also, they have made an overt and hostile first contact. It is our hope that there is a future time and place where we shall be able to make contact proper. We feel, however, that staying here is an invitation to further aggression by the group that attacked us earlier, so we should move to a safer location."

"Where are the possible sites we should move to, assuming you've researched this," I asked.

"But of course. We took data from the first recon probe and 'stretched' them, increasing the resolution and contrast of the pictobytes. We think we've found a suitable location that is currently inhabited. Its about four standard days from here, and it looks like an excellent prospect for repairing the ground cars we have and for setting camp until we make contact proper."

"I suppose you've worked out how we're going to get the cars to the new location," I hoped.

"But of course. I wouldn't have said anything unless we hadn't already done a design study of the problem. We plan on using fuel that is still on board the lander for the Tav, and using it to fly the cars to the site."

"O. K., I'll bite. The lander uses different fuel than the Tav. How are you going to make it work?"

"I'm glad you asked that," she said as she was obviously prepared. "We think we can reprogram the engine to use the higher energy fuel, much like adjusting the air/ fuel mixture when changing altitudes rapidly."

"Sounds fine to me, but won't that eventually burn out the engine?"

"True, but its not as if we're going to use this thing for a year or anything like that," she expressed.

"O. K., now can you guess the next question on my mind," I hinted to her by making a fist with my left hand.

"Of course - the probe," she correctly deduced. "We decided to leave that to you," she smiled.

"You people are SO generous," I exclaimed. "Do you have any ideas?"

"Sure - you could always bury it!"

"Right!" I laughed. "Nothing like having another T. M. I. in thirty years or so," I remarked.

"So it wasn't such a good idea. Anyway, Tearle says we should move soon before they attack again."

"I agree. I want us prepared to move as soon as I figure a way of dealing with the probe."

"Yes Sir," was her reply.

"Good. We will be in our cabin if you need me," I said with a wink in my wife's direction. "And please, don't need me," I said with a smirk.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

It had taken nearly three weeks for the Congress to prepare for the *Sako's* flight. It finally arrived at the Moria station on November 23, 2056. On board were most of the old familiars who were still alive (many had died during the six years between the war and now). Rueben Hickel was Commander of the ship. Louie was commander of the overall mission. Merri stayed behind to fill in as President while Louie was gone. Gernessy was there to save "our newly found repressed brothers far away". Lee was there to provide intelligence data on the crew of the *Phobos*. Al was there to provide a military background to deal with anything that might arise.

It was decided during the trip what would be done with the survivors from the other ship. It entailed questioning them and then dishing out whatever punishment was deemed appropriate. While this was in debate, the engineers modified the "Sako" to decrease the amount of time the hole was open. It was hoped this would reduce the amount of matter falling into it, as there was a direct relationship between time and amount, so the overall effects would be diminished. Al, with Merri's "emergency loop" helping him, had made his point. A modified version of his amendment passed, allowing the *Sako* to carry weapons. As the ship was originally designed for colonization, there was ample room for people and cargo, though the designers had not originally intended for the vehicle to carry weapons. And the final provision of the amendment was that after the survivors were picked up and contact was made proper, then preparations could begin toward making the planet totally unified - not just humanoids, but all of the indigenous life forms there. Yes, the *Sako* was prepared for anything.

CHAPTER TWENTY

As I lay next to my sleeping wife, I began dreaming of my possible future, and of my rescue. Oh, I am certain I will be rescued. And afterwards, they will want to create a new order here. The strange thing was, in my dream I was on the rescuing ship. When I (the one in the dream) arrived in orbit to rescue me (boy, this is a weird dream), I found the natives spoke perfect standard, and that we had no trouble winning them over and establishing a new order. I foresaw a problem with the other life - forms though. What if they could not converse in the same tongue as our insects, birds, and other species. I saw Merri, whom I dreamt would be the leader of this front, killed because the native insects thought he was an invading tribe or a strange mutation, in which case they would go to extremes to see Merri eradicated before he could take control. This in effect, would leave the humanoids in a dictatorial control over the natural resources of the planet. This distressed me enough to awaken me from my dream. When I awoke, I accidentally awoke Cheryl. As I strained my eyes to see in the dark, I could see her getting out of bed, heading for wherever.

"Cheryl," I weakly called as I was still semi-asleep.

"Huh? Oh, hi dear," she sighed.

"Honey, I don't mean to make an issue out of it," and I paused awhile to formulate my words, "but you're not wearing any clothes. Even though there was an A - moral uprising in '38, that doesn't mean you can walk the halls at.." I glanced at my watch, "0330 in the morning like we do at home on Mars."

"Oh, that's right. We're not at home are we. I thought the gravity seemed more here," she said sarcastically.

I sat up in bed and pushed off the covers where she had lain moments ago. "Come on honey, lets go back to sleep," I offered hopeful.

"That's fine with me, but if my memory serves me right, you were the one who awakened me," she stated as she slowly came back.

"Well, I guess so," I played the game out.

"Yes you did," she said as she crawled in with me.

"Now perhaps.." I never finished my sentence, as just then I remembered my last conversation with Louie, before we left on this trip. I could still see him standing before me, that imposing figure would make anyone who did not know him think he was unapproachable. A few lucky people actually saw into him and realized he was like everyone else. It was made apparent to me as the conversation progressed.

"So what are you going to do with Joseph Jaffrin?" he asked concerned.

"Cheryl's relatives are going to take care of him while we're away. If anything happens preventing our return, they'll be good for him."

"How's Cheryl taking it?"

"She adores Joseph, and it was hard to convince her not to take him with us. But I'm sure she'll manage. Besides, from what I gather, she kinda wants another one too," I confessed.

"Have you talked about having another child?"

"We've teased each other about it during the night, but I haven't really taken it seriously."

"Why not?"

"I don't know. Joseph is only one and a half years old. I don't think I could handle two youngsters at once right now."

"What about Cheryl?"

"I really think she wants another. She's been dropping hints here and there, especially when we're in a position to do something about it, if you know what I mean," I confessed.

"Yeah, I sure do," he chuckled.

"What about you? Have you considered remarrying?" I asked aware I was treading on unfamiliar territory.

"Yeah, but that's about the extent of it. It's hard to get over something like that - you know - ordering an attack when you know your wife is right there."

"It must have been rough," I empathized.

I was met with silence.

"Have you looked for anyone else?"

"Yeah, but everyone I'm interested in reminds me of Dayle. And things are not the same as they were with her. I guess I want things to be like they were," he professed dismally.

"You have to let Dayle go - after all, it's been six years since she died."

"The situation was different between us, but you wouldn't know that, us having known each other for four years, and only the last two as friends. But heh, that's a different matter altogether. Why don't you ask Lee? I'm sure he can tell you all you want to know," he said as he closed his eyes.

Cheryl's calling beckoned me back to reality.

"What's wrong?" she pried.

"I just had a bad dream, that's all. Now go back to sleep or I'll have to do something I may regret nine months from now," I kidded.

"Oh, I don't know. Maybe another kid would do us just fine," she teased as she wrapped her arms around me and forced me deeper into bed.

"Oh well, what the hell," I exclaimed as I gladly "went for it".

"Wake up Paul... WAKE UP!" screeched my housebot. "Wake up you bleepity bleep bleep!" Little Pete was angry. I had not once awoke when I programmed him to awaken me, and it always had to eject me out of bed. However, Cheryl was too close (basically on top of me) for it to eject me without ejecting her as well. The housebot was racked with indecision. As the minutes passed without little Pete doing anything, the wake up program slowly fried itself out of existence. Since I hadn't programmed Pete to deal with the contingency it now faced (a slight oversight on my account), it was torn between ejecting me out of bed and causing probable harm to Cheryl, or not ejecting me, which is what it was instructed to do. As the system crashed, a warning alarm went off, much to the behest of Cheryl and I.

"What's the matter with it" she asked frightened.

"Its just his way of asking for help," I answered as I climbed out of bed and pushed the override button to stop the alarm and the action it was taking. I then reset the memory drive.

The housebot, upon seeing I was now awake flashed an expression of joy across its face.

"What was wrong?" I asked.

"I tried to wake you like you programmed me to, but you wouldn't wake up. As per your instructions, I was going to eject you, but with Cheryl on top and in the position she was in, there was a ninety percent chance she would land on her back and sustain head injuries which could be potentially serious. So I could not eject you. But if I didn't eject you, you would not be awakened, so I went into a loop, which the protection system tried to alleviate by crunching the disk," it answered.

"Would the crunching of the disk prevent harm to you?" I asked unknowing of the answer.

"Yes, because with the wake - up program down I would not have to respond to the conflict, hence it would be solved.

"What would you have done afterwards?"

"I would have awaited further instructions."

"Oh well, I hope this won't happen again 'lil Pete. You may now resume your other duties," I dismissed him.

I turned to my wife and looked for any signs that she wanted to remain awake - there were none. I kissed her good morning and left to shower before continuing our trek to our new destination.

CHAPTER TWENTY ONE

Cadmus, thirty archers, twelve catapults, seventy pike men, thirty swordsmen and two knights prepared nearly ninety days for the coming attack on the "invaders". Now they were ready, and the area where the four prisoners were taken was now surrounded. When *Xanthias* reached zenith, *Cadmus* ordered the attack to commence. The catapults were let loose to pre-bombard the general attack area. Then the archers advanced to the edge of the woods, bows at the ready. Expecting to find a stunned and wounded enemy running in panic, the knights charged into the open field where the craft had been. As they reached the clearing, they stopped out of sheer confusion. The "keep" and its inhabitants had vanished. There was not even a trace or hint that people had once been there. When the pike men arrived, they too were dumbfounded. Finally, after long moments of silence, one of the knights spoke up.

"*Cadmus*, are you sure this is the place? It doesn't look like anyone ever lived here."

Sir Cadmus did not know what to say in response. "I swear they were here only thirteen weeks ago - and there was a keep in the middle of this clearing," he pointed to the spot with the corroboration of his henchman.

"Well, now what?"

"They must have moved. They couldn't have gotten far," he said more out of hope than conviction. "Search the area!"

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CHAPTER TWENTY TWO

"*Theseus*, my Lord, come quick. *Sir Hendriks* has taken ill," shouted *Sir Eaker*.

"Of course, of course," followed *Theseus*.

Arriving in *Sir Hendriks'* room, he found him lying in bed, covered with blankets. His face looked deathly white, and there were numerous burst blisters inundating his face, neck, and hands. Upon seeing his Lord, he tried to rise, but slumped back and gave a feeble cough.

"What is wrong with him?" *Theseus* whispered to the doctor.

The doctor pulled him from *Hendriks* before speaking.

"He is going to die," he said gently.

Theseus could not believe his ears. Pulling the doctor closer, he whispered softly. "Scott, you can't be serious. He was healthy only a few weeks ago."

"I cannot explain it. I haven't seen anyone with symptoms as he currently has. The only thing I can do for him is to make him comfortable."

Theseus would not accept his opinion. "Scott, why don't you bring *Levan* here so he can do his thing for *Hendriks*?"

"Of course, my *Lord*," he left to fetch the exorcist.

Theseus turned towards *Hendriks*. He could hardly bear to look at him. "How do you feel *Sir Stone*?"

"I ... feel pain...all over," he struggled to answer.

"When did you first notice you were sick?"

"About thirteen days ago. I..vomited.. all of the time..always thirsty.."

"Don't worry my friend. Everyone in the *Alliance* is praying for you. I've sent for *Anthony* to perform an exorcism on you," he tried to reassure his friend.

"Will it work?"

"I sure as *Neilso* hope so," expressed *Theseus*. Then, suddenly, he became light headed and sat next to the bed, silent while waiting for *Anthony* to arrive. A few moments later, *Scott* led *Anthony* in.

"*Anthony Levan*, I'm glad you could come on such short notice. Are you ready to perform?"

"But of course, my *Lord*," he bowed appropriately. *Anthony* doused most of the torches and moved the mirrors so the light from outside did not penetrate the room. Then he asked the non-believers to leave - including *Theseus*..

Theseus refused. He wanted to see how *Levan* performed. Although he did not believe in the exorcist's faith, he felt everyone could believe what they may. Technically, the *Alliance* was a theocracy ruled by *Theseus*.. But he let all religions persist in his territory - even if he did not agree with what they stood for. This was the case with *Anthony*. *Theseus* knew he could do little other than morally support his friend. *Anthony*, on the other hand, honestly believed he could cure *Hendriks*. And since it made both *Hendriks* and he happy, *Theseus* allowed him to perform the practice of

Hendriks' choice. With fascination he watched *Levan* give his friend, a *Lord* in his own right, some potion, followed by him going into his dancing and chanting.

After fifteen minutes, he proclaimed he finished. *Hendriks* did not look visibly better, but at least he was resting comfortably.

"Thank you," expressed the ruler of the *Alliance*."

"You're welcome, my *Lord*. Now what can I do for you? You don't look so well yourself," he noticed.

"Ah, I see you have a feel for these sort of things. I don't know what the deal is, but I've really been thirsty lately. Still, I can manage."

"I know you don't believe in my practice, but what would it hurt," he offered.

"Thanks for the generous offer, but I'm more concerned with *Sir Stone*. You know he doesn't practice his faith all that often. I fear that may be the difference."

"Maybe in your religion, but not in ours. Here it's more a matter of how you honestly feel, rather than how much of a fanatic one is."

"I guess I do put my biases into everyone else's religions."

"You know, I'm glad you're such a cooperative and understanding leader. After all, this is a proclaimed theocracy we live in, and by all rights you could impose your religion on the rest of us."

"What? And be like 'messiah' *Tristan Pytel*?" joked *Theseus* sarcastically. "I want you to personally be-head me if I ever dictate my religious beliefs on the rest of the populace."

"You know I can't do that - it's against my religion!"

"I know," laughed *Theseus*. They had a good laugh for a few minutes before returning to a more somber note. "How long will he be under?"

"I gave him enough to last two days. He should be in good spirits when he awakens."

"That's good. Here, let me reward you," he said as he pulled out a highly reflective polished ornament. "Here, take this. It was a gift from the gods - see it glows," he continued as he blew out the remaining torches. They were bathed in a purplish glow emanating from the rock.

"That's neat. Where did you get it, my Lord?"

"It fell from the sky following the coming of the apparition. I had the metal smiths work it into this object."

"Thank you. I'll treasure it for life. Is your armor made of this?" he asked knowing of the glowing armor *Theseus'* ancestors wore."

"No, but its close to what my great grandfather wore."

"Have you tested it to see if it has the same properties as *Leland's* legendary armors?"

"No, I've been too fatigued to since I've put on this armor the metalworkers made for me. Besides, it couldn't have the same properties - it doesn't glow red like the old one does."

"Has the alchemist analyzed it?"

"*Larry?* *Neilsonian* no! I wouldn't trust that crackpot with a sample of ferrous."

"Now *Theseus*, you're not being fair to *Walker*. Didn't he successfully detect that fake ore *Tristan* tried to pawn off on you in the guise of war reparations? If it wasn't for Larry, your swords would have broken on the first impact with a REAL sword."

"Any blacksmith would have detected the metals lower melting point and higher viscosity," countered *Theseus*..

"Well, if you think he's so worthless, why don't you get rid of him?"

"Why should I? If I deprive him of his natural curiosity, what good would that do? By giving him a few trivial artifacts to analyze, he feels he is doing something and he's happy. As my job is to insure people are happy, I throw most finds to him."

"Then why haven't you let him fulfill his job by analyzing these rocks. That would make him happy, and, in turn, you too."

"I would, but these are religious items. And as such, only people of the faith may obtain possession of such things."

"Did you just hear yourself? You sound like *Tristan*."

"Hmm. You are correct. I don't want to be a hypocrit, so I will give you the honor of bringing this specimen to *Larry* so he may analyze it," he said as he pulled out another rock.

Anthony grabbed it and thanked him before leaving for the Alchemist's house.

Theseus was alone in the dark and he immersed himself deep in thought. He let his mind wander, asking who or whatever was listening why *Hendriks* was ill. For a while, it seemed as though he heard someone on the other side - someone deeply perplexed. He tried to make contact, but all that met the attempt was gibberish. He gave up and went to sleep.

CHAPTER TWENTY THREE

It had taken nearly two standard weeks (six planetary) to repair the ground cars and get them in a working order. Now they were on the outskirts of the village they had designated as the most likely place of finding some sort of amicable civilization. During the voyage, some of my group reported various attempts at gaining empathetic links. But when acknowledged, a stream of unintelligible phrases would flood their minds. This elated but perplexed us. The joy was because it showed some form of intelligent life was on the planet (as if the attack on us was not enough proof). What perplexed us was the different structure and contents of the unknown thoughts. It is believed the Human brain is formed the same way for everyone on Earth. This is what allows empathetic communication to be undertaken by various peoples even if they speak different languages. Yet here were attempts at communication, but no one could make any sense out of what was being sent. This meant the structure of the native's brains were different from ours. This should not have come as a surprise, for this is a different planet, with different forces acting upon the inhabitants here. Without understanding the natives, how could we hope to communicate with them, I wondered.

My answer was soon to be put to the test, as a castle wall loomed eerily before us.

We tried to contact the dwellers via radio, but there were no signs of them having that advanced capability. The walls were impossible to climb, and no points of entry were evident. I needed a better look, and the Tav provided the mechanism to obtain good reconnaissance. As I flew over the courtyard, I noticed a large runway of sorts, so I took that as an invitation to land. By doing so, I created quite an uproar. People, or rather more properly, the natives, were running all over the place and in total confusion. It was chaotic. Some bowed their heads and went to their knees, chanting mystically. I was beginning to suspect that landing was not as good of an idea as it seemed. In the distance, an imposing figure ran towards me, pushing people out of his way. I studied him at a distance, and I recognized something familiar about his look. His armor gave off a purplish glow - a glow reminiscent of the fuel used in the main reactor of the *Phobos*.

The figure raised his arms and the crowd calmed.

Thinking this was their leader, I instructed the cocom to integrate with my pocom. After entering the compute mode, I waited what seemed like an incredibly long time before the program arrived at a usable dictionary of sorts. I keyed up on the mic, formulating my soon to be historic words. When I had them, I switched the mic to external speakers and began.

"People of the Vegan Star System. I have come here to converse with you about your role on this planet," I said remembering my training for just such a possibility. When the compulater translated into the native's language what I just said, the crowd was aghast. Again the armored figure raised his arms and silenced the group. Then he spoke.

"My name is Theseus the XVIII. It is highly unorthodox of you 'Gods' to 'converse' with us, for we are not your equals," he stated perplexed.

Oh no, I thought. I had botched it again. First we were attacked as invaders. Now I was being called a "God". Boy, when the shit starts flowing, it comes in clumps. How was I going to explain all of the contamination that I caused? I could continue to let them think I was a deity, but what good would that do? The more I thought about it, the better that option looked. If I told them I wasn't a god, they might think I was the devil or something. Not that I believed in such things. After the A - moral uprising of '38, religion was abandoned by most. But some older folks practiced, and some had even raised their kids (in secrecy) in the same manner. I decided to opt for the "God" role now and deal with the possible implications later.

"You are wrong. The mark of a true God is one who listens to his followers with interest and takes into account their whims," I stated.

The crowd grew really restless. They had never known of a god who actually cared, only of gods whom dictated. "If you are a 'god', do something miraculous," they shouted.

I was in a bind. What could I do that was miraculous? Apparently flying wasn't good enough. After some thought, it finally dawned upon me what I could do. Before the uprising, there were a group of religious fanatics who practiced a version of pseudo-medicine they termed "faith healing". It rarely worked, and when it did, it was later discovered that the "patient" either wasn't sick or had received real medical treatment elsewhere. If I could heal someone who was sick, that should satisfy them. All I would need to do is let twenty - first century medicine work on them.

"Bring me your sick, your wounded, your maimed. I shall heal them for you!" I proclaimed.

Immediately, droves of people made their way towards my vehicle.

Theseus raised his arms and thundered, "Stop!" The crowd acted obediently. "There is one amongst us," he continued, "who is most sick. I want him cared for first. If he is healed, then the rest may follow. But if not," he paused, "then only one life has been lost."

Then he went back to the large building from whence he came. He later emerged carrying Hendriks Stone. "God," he cried out. "Here is the sick man. Heal him. If you fail, may Searling take his wrath upon you," he preached as most of the crowd hissed.

I did not understand what a Searling was, but I told Theseus to lay the man next to my vehicle and then to back away. He did so, and I opened the canopy and jumped to the body below. The crowd was frightened. Then I realized my flight suit, including my helmet, was on. Taking it off, I wondered how I would have reacted to seeing a pilot in flight gear jump out of a flyer if I were a serf. I came to the conclusion I probably would think I'd seen the devil. Slowly, I walked to the lain body and observed it carefully. It looked very human, but it also had radiation damage, and didn't look like it would live very long. Gingerly, I picked it up and placed it in the cockpit with me. After ordering everyone away, I took off and headed for the rest of the group.

After landing I quickly jumped out and proudly proclaimed I had made a legal first contact. Then I briefed them on the problem - that of the natives thinking we are gods. They were shocked.

"You mean we've contaminated them again?" they yelled in unison.

"Yeah, you know we can't interfere in the life and death of others," yelled another.

I could feel a mutiny brewing. I wished my wife was around for support.

"You're hopeless as a leader Jaffrin. I urge we recall you," put forth another.

I had to act fast. "All right, quiet down. Now look, first of all, we had to make contact eventually. Though the method was unusual, we have at least made communication with the natives. If you would like, we can trash this line and start over. Or, we can make the best of the situation we now have and pull out all right. Now are you with me or against me?"

Although there was general disagreement with what I had done, the group gave in to my point of view. I was relieved.

"Good. Top priority is to return health to this sick person," I said as I lifted the native Hendriks from the Tav and carried him inside. The medical technician was not happy with what he saw.

"Paul, couldn't you have picked an easier subject? This guy is almost gone. At best he's got a two day limit on his life - even with treatment," he professed.

"I took the only one that was offered, and as for his current state, it is imperative that you make every effort to save him. I think the leader holds him to have great importance," I noted.

"O. K. Paul, but you owe me two big ones for this when we get back to Moria." Joysic ran a quick physical of his patient and determined what needed to be done to restore him to proper health. Then he efficiently administered the required amount of anti radiation sickness medicine to Hendriks. Of course, he did not know whether what

worked for humans would work for Hendriks. This was because humans genetically adapted to radiation after the war of '41. And no one knew what the Vegan's tolerances would be.

Later in the day, Hendriks awakened for the first time in two days. He was briefly disoriented, then slightly bewildered, and then extremely confused by his new surroundings. For a few seconds he thought he died and was in caelum. That idea was dispelled as soon as he heard the gods around him speak in a language he did not know. Surely, he thought, the gods should know his language. He tried to get up, but found he could not move. Great, now what, he thought as he lay still for a few libellius watching the people around him pass strange artifacts between each other. Then one of the boxes talked to him and asked his name. That was the clincher, he thought. For them not to know his name they definitely could not be gods. Therefore he would not be afraid of them.

"My name is Sir Hendriks Stone," he emphasized his Lordshipness.

"What do you call this place?" asked the doctor.

This confused him momentarily again, as he knew of no other life spheres. "We call this Linneaus," he answered.

"Well, my name is Joysic. How do you feel?"

"Numb."

"Good. How did you become sick?"

"I don't know," he answered foggily.

"When did you first notice symptoms of radiation sickness?"

"What is radiative sickness?" he asked bewildered.

"Its what you had. The symptoms are loss of appetite, great thirst, loss of hair, nausea, vomiting, blistering skin, pus flows.."

"I guess I noticed the first of what you mentioned 23 days ago."

Joysic knew that was impossible. If Hendriks had contracted them then he would have been dead 13 days ago. You must be confusing some of the symptoms with something else," he said.

I motioned for the doctor. "Joysic, I think you're forgetting something. One of their days is only equal to eight hours. Twenty two of their days is just less than four of ours," I reminded him.

"Yeah, you're right. There's your miracle. In two hours he'll be as good as new. Now what are we going to do about the contamination," he asked.

"That's a good question," I answered as I immersed myself deep in thought.

CHAPTER TWENTY FOUR

Tearle had his group specifically selected by the computer. He wanted the people in his group to have the same qualities, beliefs, etc. as him. And now that they were near the Northern Stronghold, it was time for him to let them in on his plan. Thus, he ordered his group to halt and assemble before him. When they were ready, he began his prepared statement.

"Survivors, we are about to embark on a new journey in the history of this planet. But first, I have to share with you something about yourselves. You believe you were randomly chosen by the computer to be in this group. I must say, however, that this is mistaken. You were chosen by me on the basis that all of you have grand ideas about your roles in society. Yet none of you actually do anything grand. I am going to change that for you. I will provide you with what you desire. I will provide you with success," he paused. "We are going to take over that town and install ourselves as leaders," he proclaimed.

The reaction was, expectantly, mixed. Some had objections, and he had again purposely chosen a few members precisely because of their likeliness to reject his proposition. He was about to demonstrate just how serious he was. From beneath his coat he pulled out a battle laser - a weapon banned from personal possession. Predictably, one member reacted as Tearle hoped.

"Those are illegal!" screamed Anthropologist Fischer.

Tearle knew exactly what to do. Aiming the weapon at Fischer's head, Tearle threatened his life. "Look Fischer. You're either with me or against me. If its the later, I have no qualms with killing you on the spot! Turn or burn - it's up to you."

Fischer was stunned. Battle weapons were outlawed years ago and all had been supposedly destroyed. To have one brought a prison sentence. To threaten anyone with one brought an automatic death penalty. Tearle was off his trans, thought Fischer. There was no telling how far he would go. To acquiesce would allow the destruction of civilization on this planet. He had to stop Tearle now, before he became too powerful. Motionlessly, he mentally felt for his geologic hammer hanging off his belt. With its six

kg head, it could kill a man from 5 meters if thrown hard enough. His course of action decided, Fischer quickly lifted his hammer off the belt and in the same motion flung it tomahawk style at Tearle's head. The hammer flew three meters before melting. Fischer stepped back, knowing he had not only failed, but had now given Tearle an excuse to kill him.

"You lose," said Tearle as he emotionlessly squeezed the trigger. The beam shot out from the weapon and hit Fischer just above the eyes, then continued through him and the next tree. Fischer's decapitated body slumped to the ground, his heart still beating rapidly for several minutes.

"Anyone else disagree with me?" asked Tearle fully knowing no one would now. "Good, now is here's how we'll take that village..."

CHAPTER TWENTY FIVE

Back at the camp, things were running smoothly. Much had been learned about the natives since talking with Hendriks. He was now fully recovered, but he begged to stay so he could learn more about us. But I had made a promise to Theseus that Hendriks would be back in two hours local - and "Gods" are supposed to be punctual. So I called the patient over and showed him how to harness himself in the trans. Afterwards, I borrowed a camera from one of the workers, telling him thanks and that I hope the natives enjoy the show. We then took off for the courtyard - two minutes away.

When I arrived, the area was jammed so full of people I had no where to land. I surveyed the area to find the least amount of people and hovered over the spot. "You must move away," I commanded as I nudged the jets enough to send searing heat to the crowd below. After this demonstration, they made room for me and I commenced landing procedure so they could see Hendriks waving to them. It worked. The people bowed and began praying to me. Though not exactly what I wanted, I accepted it and opened the canopy, allowing Hendriks to step out first and greet his people.

Theseus disbelieving, said hesitantly, "Hendriks, is that you?"

Hendriks walked briskly to him and explained to him that he was indeed who he appeared to be. "I'm healed, my Lord. That man," he pointed to me, "with the aid of his people helped me."

"How do you feel?"

"As good as ever," he beat himself in the chest.

It was time to introduce their guest. Hendriks turned towards the crowd and began to address it. "People of the Alliance, I present to you Paul Jaffrin, from the orbis

Earth..."

That was my cue. Confidently, I disembarked from the trans. I carried with me a camera, my pocom, and a gift (all Gods must bring gifts - or was it the other way around?! "People of Linneaus," I began. "I offer you the chance to become free from your serfness, from wars, plagues, to be free from the acts of god, and free to pursue intellectual and cultural advances."

The crowd was disbelieving. Aside from all of the big words, they had heard it before. One of the reasons Theseus' regime enjoyed such popularity was because he allowed everyone to do basically as they pleased, so long as it did not interfere with what someone else was doing.

"Prove it!" yelled someone from the crowd.

"Have not I proved it by healing Hendriks?" I countered.

"Any sorcerer could have done that," the faceless voice bellowed back.

"What if I showed you something neat?" I asked as I pulled out the camera. "But I need a volunteer. Who would like to take part in an experiment of my power?"

Immediately, a young woman from the audience stepped forward and introduced herself. "I'm Lady Bowry, and I want to disprove your claim," she professed.

"Fine. If you'd take a step closer I could show you what I'm going to do," I said as I raised the camera to my eyes. When she was closer I took a picto of her. Much to my chagrin, the flash went off, and she started screaming.

"I'm blind! I can't see!" she cried. The crowd grew restless. Shouts of "Neilso" began to be heard above the murmur.

"The effects are only temporary," I tried to calm them. Sure enough, as soon as I completed my sentence, she proclaimed she had her sight back. I took the picto out of the camera and handed it to her. She grabbed it and studied it for a few minutes before grasping what it was.

"That's me!" she cried. "How did you do that?"

"Like this," I said as I adjusted the resolution and took a picto of the crowd. Two seconds later, the image came out and I handed it to the Lady Bowry. She could recognize herself, and was surprised when she turned around and saw the crowd looked the same as it did in the picto.

"Go ahead, pass it around," I offered confident of the camera's ability to resolve each person in the audience. As each looked at the image and identified themselves, I leaned against my trans and watched them grow convinced of my story.

When it finally arrived in Theseus' hands, he knew I was telling the truth. He walked over to me and extended his arm. "On behalf of the Apprecor Foedus, I welcome you and your invitation of a better orbis to our world."

I shook his hand vigorously and proudly proclaimed, "People of Linneaus, you WILL establish a new order, with our help." And as if on cue (which it was), the ground cars and other vehicles of our expedition rolled into the courtyard. "Theseus, I will need room for my subordinates. "Will you oblige us by 'loaning' the usage of one of your buildings?"

"Of course. Let me show you and yours to thou rooms," he extended as he led us through the crowd. "These are the party chambers. They will be yours for your duration. Tonight, we will hold a banquet in your honor."

"I'm very much impressed with the architecture," I complimented.

Satisfied all was square, Theseus left us to ourselves, until the time of the party. Then I explained to him that we weren't really gods, just people like himself. Luckily, Linneaus had its equivalent of aborigines, so I could explain to Theseus that to us, he was an aborigine, and we were like him as to he was to the aborigines. While Theseus did not like being compared to an aborigine, he understood what I attempted to communicate. After the festivities (which lasted into the morning), Theseus toasted me and my group admiringly. "May this meeting lead to a lasting peaceful and prosperous future for all of Linneaus."

And with that, I thought I had solved the issue of contamination.

CHAPTER TWENTY SIX

Tearle surveyed his newly acquired surroundings with an aura of power emanating from within. The takeover had gone even better than he had planned. All he did was fly over the village and proclaim himself the people's savior. They were skeptical at first, but when one of the "disbelievers" threw a rock at his trans, Tearle dropped a phosphorus bomb on a random hut and burned it to a crisp. Then he reiterated that he was the Deus and that he had come to irradiate the disbelievers. After taking over the main keep, he called on all the inhabitants to profess their belief in him. The few who did not he rounded up like cattle and placed with cows. Left with his followers, he drafted them into the newly formed *Holy Appugnoare*.

Tearle had big plans for them. He showed them how to produce muskets and he was ready to introduce to the merchants the idea of mass production. He showed the guards a better way of defending territory, and he briefed the advanced guards on the latest 21st Century military tactics. Tomorrow he will give them their new weapons which will insure his superiority over the planet. He will give them repeat action rifles and grape - shot cannon. The bows, arrows, and swords of the other nations would be no match for Tearle's revolutionary firepower.

The walls of the throne room - his now, were scarred by laser bursts. Although the general populace quickly gave into him, the King and his guards had held on stubbornly, until Tearle showed his awesome power by downing an entire rank of the king's knights. The King immediately abdicated and Tearle pillaged whatever he could. It was not much. 12th Century living left Tearle with few resources in this one of the poorer kingdoms. He knew time was not on his side. He figured about a month would be all he would have to teach these pions the principals of an industrial society. The rescuers would arrive soon, he thought. He had to be in firm control of the planet before then. For when they arrive, he means to give them one heck of a surprise!

CHAPTER TWENTY SEVEN

Sir Cadmus was extremely upset at having his knighthood withdrawn by his Lord because of his failure to find the intruders. Not even Akbred could persuade Lord Tristan of Cadmus' truthfulness. While under Akbred's potion of all knowing, he skillfully recanted the events of the trek to where the "Jorganites" had been. He told of his findings -nothing, and of the three day search of the area for signs of the invaders. Reluctantly, he had gone back to tell Tristan of the failure, only to find Tristan incensed with anger, whereby he stripped Cadmus of his knighthood.

The event was still gnawing at him, when Chaben informed him that his audience was required by their Lord. With that in mind, he went quickly to Tristan's throne room. At the entrance to the room, Cadmus was greeted by a high ranking officer of Tristan's army. The officer led him through the double oaken doors and announced lowly Cadmus' arrival.

Sitting at Tristan's huge T shaped table were the thirteen surviving knights of his elite guards. Cadmus looked at the fourteenth and fifteenth empty spots, one of which used to be his. He reflected grimly on the details of Sir Larry Hogans' death, which according to Joenesle, was very hot. Cadmus would avenge Larry's death, he hoped as he unconsciously took his seat. Only after the other guards squirmed, did he realize his mistake. Still, his Lord had not yet kicked him out of his old seat.

Tristan stiffened slightly and began. "I am sure you're all wondering why I called you, and especially you, Cadmus. As you know, there has recently been increases in the duration of incursions into our territory by the adversarius. I have talked with the other

members of the Tristan Feudalation and they all agree something must be done to stop these breaches of security. They left the something for me to decide. After much consultation with Akbred, I have come to the conclusion that Theseus and his allies are about to attack us. The recent incursion by the aliens seems to back this up. Though they supposedly know nothing of Theseus and his ways, they were found near his border and they seem to have been put under some sort of amnesia. Also, the prisoners are making notes of our defenses and layout. My only conclusion is that they plan on being rescued and then show Theseus' troops our weaknesses. It is thus that I issue two directives. The first is that we must launch a pre-emptive strike against the A.F.A.. However, it won't be a pre-emptive strike per se. Actually, it will be the final offensive we have all wanted!" he said as he slammed his fist on the table, creating a loud and long echo in the cavernous room.

Akbred was visibly shaken, but he quickly maintained a damper on his external signals. Inside, his mind raced to foresee the outcome of this. It would mean the death of Chloris. Over the last week or so, he had developed a strong lust for her. So much so, he had stopped the interrogations and the sexual harassment she received by Chaben and his guards. And now she was going to die, he wept. But not if he could help it, he confessed to himself.

The reaction of the knights was predictable. All of them smiled brilliantly with expectations of the culmination of a war which had lasted generations - since before the beginning of recorded history, in sight. If they proved themselves once again worthy of their knighthood, Lord Tristan would give them their own keeps and some territory with which they could build new strongholds. Being generally greedy, they looked forward to the coming battle with great enthusiasm. Of the sixteen people there, Cadmus had the greatest enthusiasm - next to Tristan's. Cadmus hoped he could lead an army into battle against forces of the A.F.A. He was sure that if he proved himself, his knighthood would be restored. With that, he would receive a tax break and a gain in salary. And here was the chance to avenge his friend, Larry Hogans death. Yes, he thought. I will kill Hendriks for Larry.

Tristan waited patiently a few minutes so he could read everyone's faces, and potentially their thoughts. For a second, it seemed as though Akbred was troubled, but he returned to his normal stone like appearance. Cadmus seemed happiest to Tristan. He was sorry he had reduced him in rank, but now Cadmus would have a chance to redeem himself.

"I can see by your response," Tristan continued, "that you approve of my directives. The time table for the offensive is as follows: I want the army equipped to march tomorrow. I want them to assemble around the fifteen of you - yes Cadmus, you have a temporary reinstatement of your rank. Sir Neilson, you will designate whose command the draftees will be under. I want the attack to begin in two days. We must take Theseus by surprise. And remember -this is a pre - emptive strike. Akbred - when you're around the prisoners, you will 'inform' them of the strike. If my hunch is right, they'll escape and tell Theseus of this and he will have a small reception party for us.

Of course, they'll be expecting an equally small party, not the full-fledged Appugno that it is," he gleamed with pure delight. Now be gone with you, and may Diripio help us win and see the absolute extinction of the Theseus family line and of the Alliance!"

With that, everyone rose from the table and left.

CHAPTER TWENTY EIGHT

Last week had been a nightmare for Chloris. This week was much better. She was moved from the dungeon and placed in a bigger room - complete with a window, bath, and a bed. She was assured by Akbred that the others were being treated similarly. She knew Akbred had a thing for her, and she had used it to her advantage on several occasions already. She had got over her original disgust at being violated by Chaben and his men, though every now and then she had nightmares of being raped by them. If not for her studies in primitive cultures, she wouldn't understand what or why they did it (rape was unheard of by 2030 in all but the remote areas of human deprivation). She was having another nightmare when Akbred strolled in unannounced and unnoticed. Akbred noticed her tossing and turning, so he went over to her and knelt beside her. Wanting to appear to comfort her, he reached out and touched her. Chloris convulsed and screamed violently, terrified at the touch.

"It's only I," he said professionally.

Chloris shrank from him, visions of his telling Chaben to have her flooded her mind. "I only want to comfort you, I noticed you tossing and turning restlessly."

"You scared me," she muffled.

"I'm sorry. I have some bad news for you. Lord Tristan has ordered all of your deaths. You see, they really should have been more cooperative."

"Including me?" she asked hopeful of a negative answer.

"Yes."

Her spirits fell. "Oh," was all that she could muster.

"I might be able to swing a stay of execution - if you..."

She had an idea of what that meant, but she saw her chance and she went for it. "What do I have to do?"

"You know, certain favors, I think," not expounding on what they were.

"What kind of favors?" she pressed.

"You're the only prisoner with a room. The others are in dungeons. You should be with Ashford and Vladimir, and Chaben and his pigs should still have their way with you. I've taken a big risk allowing you to reside here. If Tristan found out, he'd have my head," he lied. Actually, this was all part of the plan to isolate her, to get her to accept him, and finally, to get her to talk. "So when I spare your life, I want you to understand the risk I took."

She understood the gravity of the situation. She also knew that someone had to remain alive to tell the rescuers of what happened here. For all she knew, my group might be dead. Reluctantly, she decided that she would sacrifice her strong personal values in order that she survive. "Suppose I comprehend what you're saying. What will happen to the others?"

"They will be put to death, as will someone with the appearance of you. After the execution, I will take you to my private chambers."

"When will I die?"

"Tomorrow."

"Can I see them before then?"

"I'll see what I can arrange."

"Thanks."

CHAPTER TWENTY NINE

The bridge of the **Sako** was inundated with tension as the time to exit was approaching. Would the ship make it? Though the ship had been altered to withstand the after effects of egression, the crew was uncertain as to the extent of damage they would receive.

"Well Mario, here is where we either praise you or lynch you," commented the Commander.

"I hope its the former and not the later," he remarked.

"Well, we find out in a minute," claimed Willos as the Chrono counted the last few seconds. At zero, the ship exited the wormhole and light from Vega filled the main plasma display device. The Commander opened a comlink to the crew. "This is your Commander. We have completed egression from the wormhole. Stand by for the shock wave."

Everyone except the bridge crew went into their protective cocoons developed to protect their genes from the radiation after bursts. As the ship slowed, the shock wave overtook the ship. The lights flickered off, and the emergency ones came on. All sound

ceased, as the entire power network circuited itself off. This was not only expected, but desired. The craft had been re-opticed to provide E. M. P. radiation protection that was standard on all military but not civilian craft. When a large burst of radiation was detected, circuit breakers would shut off so as not to allow conductance to equipment that might be damaged by electro-magnetic effects. It was calculated that two minutes would be sufficient enough time to allow for the passage of the pulse. The power on would have to be accomplished manually. It was eerie on board, and everyone was nervous, as Willos gradually brought the system back on line. No one spoke until the ventilators sprang back to life, then cheers went up simultaneously. They had withstood the effects of egression. They were now only two standard days from the second planet.

CHAPTER THIRTY

The master sergeant surveyed his new leader suspiciously. The tall stocky man before him did not seem to radiate brilliance. He had dark black hair, which was in total disarray. He wore glasses, having lost his contacts. His physic was almost gorilla like. He certainly did not look like or act like the "god" he claimed to be. But he did provide the army with strange new weapons which were more powerful than any he'd seen during his career. That they were produced by only one man astonished him. They were so identical, he could not tell any of them apart. He wondered how they would do in battle.

"Master Sergeant Toso reporting as ordered," he announced.

"Good. I want a report on how the draftees are handling the rifles I developed for you."

"They are confused with the operation of the rifles. You only trained 20 of us in the usage of them. The 1800 others ha.." he was cut off."

"1800? What about the other 400?"

"As I was saying, they had no idea how to use them. 370 wounded themselves - 118 mortally - while examining the rifles."

Tearle was not happy with this development. It meant the postponement of the attack.

"Alright, here's what you do. Divide everyone up into groups of 90 and instruct them on the proper usage of the rifle. You have one day to make everyone proficient in the use of them," he ordered.

"By your command," said the Master Sergeant as he turned and left to train the "recruits".

CHAPTER THIRTY ONE

Ashford was physically and mentally drained to the point of exhaustion. Akbred's women were too much for him. They were on him night and day - eight hours out of the eight hour Linneatian day. Between the s. and m. routines, they kept asking him where he came from and what some guy named Theseus was doing. By end of the third day, he could no longer perform, he was so exhausted. Vladimir didn't have it any better. When one set of women were through with him they would switch to Ashford. All of this took place in the dungeon with Vladimir and his interrogators on the left, and the rotting corpse of Aridine between. For the first time in a standard week, there were no women upon them. Ashford weakly turned to see if his friend was awake. He could not see past the dead body.

"Vlad, you awake?"

"Yeah," he answered weakly.

"We have to get out of here."

"Right. But how?"

"I don't know." They laid chained to the floor in silence for a few minutes. Then Chaben's face appeared in the window.

"There is someone to see you," he bellowed. The door opened and Chloris strode confidently in. She was immediately overcome by the odor of Aridine, and promptly barfed on the wall. Recovering, she looked past the corpse still chained to the floor and saw the Russian's naked and abused body chained also to the floor. Despairingly, she turned to her left to see the African's bronze naked body similarly abused. She turned and told Chaben to leave them.

He did so, closing the door behind him stopping whatever circulation there might have been. Chloris bent over Vladimir, and taking a timid breath, asked how he was.

"Can't you tell?"

"Yes, I imagine so," she said as she made a closer examination of the damage. She had always thought him attractive, and had often envisioned herself rocking him. The sight of his former "grapes" which were now only a shadow of his former self distressed her. At least they would soon be out of their misery, she tried to look on the bright side. Maybe now would be the proper time to tell them, she thought. "I can see by both of your looks that you're having a rough time of it," she said in typical European upper lip. "Well, there might be some good news. You are to be executed T. R. W., both of you."

She was met with a very long silence. It was Vladimir who spoke first. "At least the torture will stop." Then after a few seconds added, "and to think I once.." he winced as he continued, "wanted to pork every girl in school. But what about you? You seem to be doing quite well for yourself."

Expecting the question to come up, she gave her prepared answer. "In all appearances I am to be executed as well. However, in actuality, I will be spared so as to provide, uh, entertainment, if you will, for Akbred," she said with disgust. "While I would normally prefer death to this, someone has to be here to tell what's been going on here."

"I see, so I guess this is good-bye?" offered Ashford.

"I'm afraid it is," she said as she kissed them both. "I will not forget nor allow others to forget you!"

CHAPTER THIRTY TWO

Stovis was a strong man. He had done well against all that Akbred threw at him. Through it all, he had divulged no information about Theseus' defenses. During the three months that he was a prisoner, he had much time to plan for an escape. All he needed was the chance, and he would be ready to seize it. It seemed to him that it would never come, though. Still, he had hope that it would. It was while thinking of his wife that the chance presented itself. Chaben opened the barred door, and stepped in.

"Eat up," he ordered as he placed his swill on the floor near the door. Then he turned his back and locked the door behind him. As was usual, Chaben then sat in front of the door, and proceeded to eat his own dinner. It was much more palatable than what the prisoners ate, and was one of the rewards when they spoke up. By eating in front of the prisoners, Akbred calculated that it would be only a matter of time before the aroma would break the prisoner's barriers. Chaben leaned forward and brought a big spoonful of food to his lips. "Ummm. Someday, all this could be yours," he teased. Then he swallowed the food, a big grin on his face. Suddenly, he began gasping for air. His arms flailed his chest, and his face turned red. The struggle for air seemed lost, as Chaben's body slumped to the floor and laid purposely against the door.

Dennis took his chance. He reached between the doors and grabbed the keys. Then he opened the lock and carefully opened the door. No one was in sight. Dennis quickly searched the guard's pockets and pulled out a knife. Then he fled to the secondary entrance where he was brought in. As he expected, there were only two guards, and one was asleep. Stealthily, he sneaked up on them. Then he picked up a rock and threw it away from the guard. The distracted guard turned to see what made the sound. He didn't see the escapee pounce on him and sink the knife deep into his chest. He was dead. Before the sleeping sentry had a clue as to what was going on, he too was dead. His escape from the castle completed, Dennis ran like Neilso to the friendly territory of Theseus.

CHAPTER THIRTY THREE

Akbred was startled by a knock on the door. He excused himself from the table and answered the door. It was Chaben who was doing the knocking.

"It worked! He's gone!" exclaimed Chaben.

A look of relief crossed Akbred's and Tristan's face.

"When?" asked the Lord.

"About 20 minutes ago. Its taken me that long to recover from Akbred's potion," he said.

"I'm glad you did recover. There were a few variables I was unsure of when I concocted that stuff," admitted Akbred.

"You mean I really could have died?"

"Yes."

Tristan let out a laugh. "A. K., every day you show us why YOU are the interrogator and not I," professed their Lord.

"Thank you, my Lord. How long before our betula reaches the nest?" Akbred changed the subject.

"He'd better be there tomorrow, I'm planning on it," confessed Lord Tristan.

CHAPTER THIRTY FOUR

A man came scurrying from the bushes like a rat right at the Cathedral's gates. He did not look familiar to the guard, so he raised his bow at the object and commanded it to stop. "Halt! Identify yourself!" he screamed.

"It is I, Dennis Stovis, of the Appugno. I have just escaped from the Feudalation," he bellowed back.

"Relax while we check on you," issued the guard as he sent for the man's wife. When she arrived, she was allowed to look through a porticus to see her husband. To her, it looked like him. One could never be sure, though, so they asked her to ask him a question only he would know the answer to.

"How old is my sister?" she asked suspiciously.

"Which one?" came the answer. "Peggy or Marilyn?"

"You tell me?" she queried.

"They're the same as you - 29."

"Denny, its you!" she cried.

The guard slowly lifted the door and allowed the escapee in. Immediately, the man and his wife embraced each other and kissed for a long time. Gingerly, he pulled away and told them he had to tell Theseus something extremely important. He was led directly to his chambers.

CHAPTER THIRTY FIVE

I sat across from Theseus, who looked pale. "Are you alright?" I asked.

"I think I might be catching a cold," dismissed the ruler. "I could have a doctor look at you, if you'd like?"

"No, I'll get over it. Besides, I want to get back to our original discussion. Now please continue to tell me why castles are impractical?"

"Because they cause stagnation, they're obsolete, and they're indefensible," I contended.

"Why?"

"If someone wanted to hurt you, they could just out flank you and proceed to the nearest town."

"What good would that do? You'd still have a castle capable of harassing supplies and launching an offensive at leisure. Besides, who in their right mind would attack someone without attacking the castle first? The castle is the pinnacle of defense. To take a castle is to insult your enemy more than you can possibly imagine," he countered.

"You miss my point. You are uselessly wasting forces by attacking easily defensible positions when you should be raiding the countryside and effectively taking the nation, save for a few token resistance points."

"You'd have to take them out sometime, so why not do it when your troops are strong and fresh?"

Just as I was about to answer, Eaker Sr. strode in and whispered into Theseus' ear. "Send him in," ordered Theseus.

Dennis Stovis walked briskly in and knelt before his leader.

"Rise," commanded his king. "What important news of my enemy have you?"

"While being a prisoner, I have overheard 'Lord' Tristan prepare for an attack against you. Apparently, he plans a pre-emptive strike tomorrow or the next day."

"Tomorrow?"

"Yes, I did pass quite a few troops on my way here."

"What kind of force are we talking about?"

"They looked to be mostly raiders - horses and bows, a few swordsmen and the like."

"Raiders?" he frowned. "I wonder what he plans on hitting with those?"

"Well, I did overhear them say something about teaching the farmers a lesson."

"If I may interrupt," I interceded, "this is precisely what I was said one should do when attacking an enemy."

"Yes, you may be right. Perhaps you could help me deal with them?" asked Theseus.

"I would be happy to direct your defense, if it is allowed."

"Of course, you are so wise."

"I need a complete rundown on the standing size of your army, your reserves, your equipment, and supplies. Also, I would like a map, no I think I can make a better map from my

trans. Which reminds me, how would you like to take a ride in my trans while I do a recon?"

"I'd love to," he voiced enthusiastically.

Several minutes later, we were airborne. If he hadn't seen it earlier, Theseus would not have believed it. We flew 900 meters above his grounds. The view was transmitted to the artificial canopy, giving one the impression there was only glass between the ground and the trans. I showed Theseus how to enlarge any object just by touching that area on the canopy. He could clearly see people walking about the grounds. Enlarging the picture, he could even tell what weapons they had, and whether they were awake or not. The concept was incredulous to Theseus. He returned the scene to the real-space screen, and saw for the first time what his land looked like from above. And he saw how truly small his Cathedralis was. The thought sunk into him deeply, before he was able to seize upon the benefit of the view. He turned his body to see Tristan's boundary, and touched the display to enlarge it. The woods exploded into view, every tree, every animal was seen, including the advance party of Tristan's. Sure enough,

they did look like raiders. The tactical implications hit Theseus almost immediately. "What are the chances you'll let me direct my defense from here?"

"None," I declared after much thought. "I'm afraid I've done too much already," and I headed for the Cathedralis.

"Why?"

"Because I've interfered again."

"You said you would help me."

"Probably, but not the way you expect me to."

"Where does this leave me defensively?"

"Exactly where you should be - on your own!" I landed the trans and let Theseus out.

CHAPTER THIRTY SIX

"That's what it looks like," I said as I slammed the pictos onto the table.

"Should we tell Theseus?," asked my wife.

"I don't know. If we tell him, he's sure to prepare for such a large attack as this appears. By doing so, we will be interfering again."

"And if we don't help them?" she asked.

"Then we'd better prepare to move - fast. Theseus is only expecting a minor raid. I doubt he can survive without our help. And we know how Tristan thinks of us."

"I don't think we have much choice. The way I see it, we'll be on this planet for quite some time, so we'd better make friendly with the natives," she offered.

"Yep, you're right," I concurred. "Let's call a congress," I offered as the pocom quickly linked all of the group together.

"If you'll watch carefully, you will see the pictos I took of Tristan's armies massing at the border," I instructed. "As you can see, that is no raiding party. It is my guess that Tristan has dealt Dennis misinformation, so as to dupe Theseus to believe a small raid was in progress. This would reduce the amount of available forces for the defense of

his stronghold. And as you can see, Theseus is just bluffing when he says he has over 100 knights. Ninety percent of them are in actuality just scouts. His guards are asleep half of the time, as can be seen in this pictobyte," I proved by showing a wonderful image of 5 guards sleeping in the forward nest. "Unfortunately, his logistics is no where near where he said they were. Most of what he has is far away, and would not arrive in time to contribute to the coming battle. I don't see him holding out from a siege for over a week - tops," I concluded.

"What is the worst case scenario?" asked the temporal Specanner.

"If we did nothing, Theseus's regime would fall, and a stain of darkness would envelop the planet. Also," I ignored the chimes of the others wanting to comment on my last statement, "I don't think we can move within two standard days. As you can see, Tristan's forces are only eight standard hours away. Thus, we must interfere not only on Theseus's behalf, but on our own as well!"

"I agree as well," entered my wife. "But in what form should our aid be?"

"Theseus is very interested in the implications of sub orbital reconnaissance. If we provide recon data to him, he will be delighted, and it would strengthen our bond. Also, it's not that bad of an interference by us: 'Data shared with natives ranks at the bottom of the interference scale'," I quoted.

"In what form should the data be?" asked a member of the congress.

"Strictly recon. I'll take the transport and provide Theseus with raw imagery - not enhanced, showing Tristan's units, their weaponry, their location, and possible avenues of attack. I'll also show Theseus *his* forces, their weaponry and state of readiness, as well as SIR imagery, to show any tunneling attempts Tristan may make."

"Just what are his forces?" asked another congressional person.

"O. K., here's the picture," I said as Cheryl helped me call up Tristan's forces. "He has 13, maybe 14 high knights, each commanding three armies. The armies are deployed 120 degrees apart, with the Cathedralis as the origin. Two armies consist of 3,540 men, and the northern one has only 2,230. Of the 3540, 2100 are swordsman, 100 pike men, 4 are knights, 208 are purely movers of equipment, 200 are engaged in tunneling, 80 are with a huge catapult, and the rest are archers. Tactically, I'd say Tristan has done an incredible job considering the 'backward' nature of Linneaus."

"Now lets examine Theseus' defenses," I continued. "He has 10 knights, and four armies. Three armies are deployed against the other three, with one in reserve. Each army consists of: 2 knights, 1780 men divided as follows: 500 swordsman, 900 archers, 170 pike men, 100 laborers, and the rest are counter - tunneling. At the Cathedralis, his Fourth army has 4 knights, 154 ballistas, 56 catapults, 500 inept guards, 908 swordsman, 3800 potential draftees with no equipment or armor, and 69 special

'invisible' forces. I still haven't figured out what Theseus meant by that. Lastly, he has the castle itself. Over the last few minutes I've come to realize what an asset that is. With Theseus' meager forces, he has no hope of defeating Tristan in the open field or woods. However, because he has a wall to hide, uh, fight behind, his forces can wait until a good opportunity presents itself. With the primitive technology these natives have, Tristan has no choice but to tunnel the walls or climb them. And with the height of the walls, there is nothing Tristan can do without being noticed. Also, his arrows and bolts will travel further and faster than those aimed up from the ground. Thirdly, there is the element of surprise. Tristan cannot see into the Cathedralis, so he has no way of knowing Theseus' weaknesses. By letting Theseus know of Tristan's forces, Theseus can prepare and gain the surprise himself. As long as he maintains the surprise, he can win. Also, by using the recon data, he can provide accurate and withering fire at the enemy. Besides, there is nothing Tristan can do without us, and Theseus, knowing. So you see, even though we are outnumbered, it isn't over yet. On the contrary, I propose it has just begun!"

"When will Tristan engage Theseus' forces?" asked someone.

"Looks like tomorrow?"

"Why?"

"Knowing the way Tristan acts from what Theseus has told me, I can tell he wants Theseus to engage him in the open fields and crush him there. He doesn't have to attack the Cathedralis directly. He knows it would cost too much for him to try a direct assault. Hence his ploy to lure Theseus into battle. If Theseus were smart, he should withdrawal all of his forces to the Cathedralis perimeter. Not only would that save his castle, but it would also be an insult to Tristan, showing the prisoner was not believed," I suggested.

"I hope so," commented Cheryl.

"Now lets prepare for the attack."

CHAPTER THIRTY SEVEN

Throughout the night, Tristan's armies moved into position around Theseus' Cathedralis. Sir Bob Nelson commanded the northern army. Sir Cadmus commanded the eastern one, and Sir William Priser commanded the westerly army. Sir John Riper commanded the mining operation, and the remaining knights were integrated amongst the various armies, with two held in reserve. As the sky brightened with the light of Vega, Lord Tristan conferred with some of his recruits about the coming battle. As the minutes before the attack ticked away, the armies on both sides became tense with anticipation. With a brilliant burst, Vega rose above the nearby mountains and exploded forth as a beautiful golden star rise. With a slight fog lifting from the trees, the whole scene looks quite peaceful. As soon as Xianthia rose completely above the mountains

and bathed his armies in its light, Tristan gave the order to attack. His order was passed from man to man, as the armies began their assault.

They quickly charged into the woods where Theseus was expected to be. After running for nearly five minutes, they became tired and slowed to a battle walk. They had not met the enemy. Tristan grew uneasy. He felt something was wrong. He was committed, and there was no turning back now. With a growing weariness, he ordered them to press onward. The element of surprise he so desperately wanted seemed not to be there. The troops were four hours from the castle. Only time would tell now whether he had made the right decision.

The guard was startled into awakenedness by an approaching rider. Sleepily, the guard peered through the archers' hole and observed the rider. It was Vioni. The guard was expecting him. Slowly, he rose the gate and allowed the cloaked figure entrance. The rider acknowledged the guard's respect as he passed him on his way to see Theseus.

"I wish I had more troops," commented Theseus across the table to me. "If what you're showing me is for real, and I don't doubt it for a minute, then Tristan outnumbers me four to one."

"I can assure you this is true. As far as more troops go, my group cannot help you there. We can, however, help you with logistics. From what we've seen, Tristan's archers only have 6 - 8 bows each. On the other hand, you have nearly 12. While the total number of arrows you have is lower, they will have more effect than his because of the greater height and speed they possess. We will also make more for you. If you loan us 50 arrows, we will give you 500 in 10 minutes - uh, 30 of your minutes," I corrected myself. "Within three Linneatean hours you'll have 120 arrows per archer. With numbers like that, you could easily fight a battle of attrition, inflicting more casualties than he can afford to take."

"What about the swordsmen and knights? They're armored and arrows are useless against them."

"Arrows are, but bolts are not. I can do the same for the bolts as I can for the arrows. When we're done, you'll have 60 bolts per ballista, as opposed to the current 10."

"That will help a great deal, thanks. Looks like I've reduced the odds quite a bit. But he still has an advantage over me," confessed Theseus.

"Right, but we want to reduce the odds even further, so we'll even produce copies of..." I was interrupted by a figure bursting through the door.

"My Lord," it began, "Tristan's armies have begun the advance. We withdrew as you ordered and are taking positions alongside the regulars."

"When did he start?" asked Theseus.

"At first daylight. He has three armies marching from all directions on us."

"That means he's only about two hours away. Call up the reserves and get more volunteers. The battle is about to begin," proclaimed Theseus. The figure left, leaving Theseus and I alone. "I'm going to need that stuff sooner than I'd hoped," he told me. "Sir Eaker?" he called his guardian who quickly entered and took station alongside Theseus.

"What is it, my Lord?" he asked.

"Bring Paul a quiver of arrows and a few bolts. He's going to make more for us, but he needs them to see how they're made."

"Of course, my Lord," vouched the midget.

"Well, I have a lot of things to do Theseus. Ask Eaker to bring them to my room. We'll make them as fast as we can," I promised as I rose and left the room.

Theseus sat alone, thinking silently about the coming battle. He reached outward to his deity for guidance and strength. Instead of contacting Searling, he got someone, or something, else.

CHAPTER THIRTY EIGHT

Louie had been sleeping deeply, unaware of the outside world. He did not remember when he began dreaming, but for some unexplained reason the dream changed scene suddenly and dramatically. One moment he was operating on Merri after Merri's battle with the spider Weber, and the next he seemed to be some kind of feudal lord during the middle ages. The strangeness of the dream startled his consciousness. Where did he get an idea like that from? He suppressed his wonderment, fearful the dream might dissolve before it's significance would become clear. As he fought to regain the dream, he started to feel visions which seemed too real to be part of the dream. Louie awoke and placed the interprecon over his head. He instructed it to record the previous images as well as any that might follow. With the machine acknowledging his order, Louie reached not inward, but out in an effort to gain a link with whoever or whatever contacted him before. Slowly, and with great difficulty, he reached the sender. When he tried to communicate, all that met him was gibberish from a confused and startled

being. Louie then linked his pocom with the interprecon and had the compulate program translate what the other was thinking.

"You're not Searling. Who are you?" thought a bewildered response.

"I am Louie LaSalle, President of the United Earth Foundation. Who are you?"

"You mean you don't know? How can one be on the Almighty's thought path yet not know who I am? Where is Searling?!" many other questions flooded in, taxing the computer's ability to translate them.

Louie was confused. Who was Searling, and what does the "Almighty" reference have to do with anything, wondered Louie. "Where are you?" he thought.

"I am in my Cathedralis. You mean you can't see me either?" was the response. "If you

don't know who I am, where I am, and can't see me, how do you come to possess a voice and hear my thoughts?"

The President was no longer confused. He remembered Jack telling of life on the second planet. That must be where the message was coming from, he figured. With a link already gained, Louie hoped that whoever was on the other side could establish empathy. He concentrated hard, and with much effort broke through Theseus' defenses.

Everything that Theseus knew was available to Louie. After scanning his memories, a great understanding of Linneatian life and culture was opened for Louie. To his displeasure, he also found the contamination he feared. "Theseus the XVIII, or should I say Ornako," he began, "I now know everything you do. You also know much about me, though it will be some time before you comprehend it all. I must ask you a favor."

"How is it that you know my true identity?" asked a fearful Theseus.

"I know all about the A. N. A., the war between your ancestors and Tristan's, and about your grandfather killing those two whores for experience," confessed Louie.

"What whore? I don't know what you're talking about," lied Theseus.

"Yes you do. But if your memory ails you, I shall refresh it. Your grandfather, while stationed at Lord Georgain's keep, wanted to gain some experience before his quest to find Weland began. He figured he could gain experience by killing some people. He rationalized that the easiest people to kill were whores. He killed one, but was discovered by another, so that one was murdered as well."

"I know all there is to know about you and Paul. I want you to tell him he is grounded and that his president demands a link with him."

I will," obeyed Theseus.

CHAPTER THIRTY NINE

Upon hearing from Theseus that the President of the U. E. F. demanded to speak with me, I knew two things. One was that the rescuers were near and the other thing was that he is upset. This is not going to be easy, I thought as I solomonly gained a telecommunications long range link.

"Mr. President, you wanted to speak with me?" I asked knowingly.

"Absolutely," came the reply. "First, you are grounded. I do not want you to provide the reconn data to Theseus which you promised."

"Why not? You don't know the situation down here. Where did you get your info from - Theseus?"

"Yes," was the terse reply.

"Well that source is biased. He doesn't know **why** we are doing the things we will for him. All he knows is our response, our actions, not our reasons," I countered.

"Then please explain - for the record - the reasons for your actions," he ordered.

"O. K. When we crashed, we did not know there were indigenous life forms on the planet. As we set up camp, we were attacked by the natives. They killed four and captured three of us. Tearle felt they would attack again, so we split into two groups, with Tearle commanding one and me the other. After we separated, I took my group to Theseus' area. After a few Linneation nights, we heard of an impending attack by Tristan. Lord Tristan's forces were the ones that attacked us earlier.

"I had three choices, as I saw the situation. One was to stay with Theseus and not help him. We originally decided to do this, but then we saw what a huge force Tristan had deployed against Theseus. We did not feel he could survive without our aid."

"The second option was for us to move to another location and ignore the battle. We figured it would take two standard days to for us to move. We had only eight hours available to do so."

"The third option was to stay and help Theseus. We are giving him no new technology weapons. All we are doing is enhancing his capabilities. We do not want Tristan to win, because we already know how he feels towards us - it would mean the death of us all if we stayed and Theseus was defeated. We figured if we could just keep the battle going

on long enough for you'ns to arrive, then we would be all right. By the way, how far out are you?"

"One standard day. I cannot endorse your actions, nor can I condemn them. I suppose I would do as you have if I were in your boots. Can you prolong the battle until we arrive?"

"No problem. The way I see it, Tristan plans on laying siege to the castle anyway. I think Theseus can hold out until you arrive. He doesn't quite know the scope of the assistance we're giving."

"Oh? And just what else do you plan to do besides providing reconn data and a few thousand arrows?" Asked a concerned Louie.

"You forgot about the few hundred bolts. And I haven't told him about the surprise we plan on giving Tristan's little breech attempt."

"What kind of surprise?" he yelled.

"We've placed seismic sensors around the perimeter. When their forces get close to the wall, we'll have Theseus' forces counter-tunnel and pour molten glass into the mine," I confessed.

"The heck you will," screamed the President. "I demand an empathetic link NOW!"

Louie LaSalle reached out and picked up on my consciousness. As he delved deeper into my mind, he learned of my plan to decisively defeat Tristan. And he learned my reason for doing so was motivated by revenge and guilt for my crewmate's deaths. He also learned of the radiation contamination, my pretending to be a deity, and of the lack of initiative shown by any of the other survivors. With my actions now known, he needed to understand my reasoning behind them. Slowly and methodically, he skillfully removed the barriers I placed in his path. Through a series of flanking maneuvers, my motivation opened before him. As he studied it carefully, he realized why I had done what I had. Louie was impressed. He ceased his search and continued the previous transmission.

"Paul," he began. "I now understand why you acted the way you did. Without the true knowledge you just shared with me, I was unable to comprehend your decisions. Armed with your most inner thoughts, I can see they are the right choices. I hereby dissolve from the official record any ideas of your guilt. You did good P. J. I wish Tearle had done as you have." Then a thought crept into him. What is Tearle doing with his group? "Where is Tearle?" he asked.

"I don't know. We lost contact when we arrived here, and I've been pre - occupied with things here," I offered.

"All right. I am going to see what he is up to now," he said as that basically terminated our conversation.

Louie called for Tearle on the radio, but there was no answer. He tried to gain an empathetic link with him, but not even the master creator of the "remote consciousness unification theory" could gain a link with someone uncooperative.

CHAPTER FORTY

Louie sat quietly, deep in thought. The idea that Tearle might be on the loose did not sit well. He urgently needed to get to Linneaus and find out what the renegade is up to. "Rueben," he asked the acom to acquire the engineer. "What is the soonest we can be around Second?"

"Twenty hours. Why?"

"What I have to tell you is so secret it is beyond classification. But before I clue you in, I want you to assemble the following people in the forum at once: Lee Roalnvoo, Al Severly, Dr. Teresa Bennet, Tu Xeng, and Calpruni Pisoni," he commanded.

"By your command," was the efficient response.

Twelve minutes later, they assembled as instructed.

Satisfied that everyone was waiting, Louie began to speak.

"The matter I am about to discuss is extremely, and I stress extremely, sensitive. No one other than we seven are to hear this. I have even disconnected all monitoring units so as to sanitize the record. Although the doctor does not have any classification, I have given her a temporal level of two. I will explain my reasons for this shortly."

"Doctor Bennet," he turned towards her and addressed her directly. "Would you show us the records of Tearle Durko which I asked you to bring?"

After calling them up on her libcom, she linked it with everyone's pocoms, so they could see the records. "About five years the subject was brought to me by the former nation of Germany. The Army complained of his psychosis, and they wanted me to treat him. I brought him into the ward and observed several different psychological problems with him. They included acute paranoia, schizophrenia, delusions of grandeur, and worship of 20th century dictators and their ways. After two years, he was finally released, having been treated. In '52, with his and most other nations crumbling under our world order, he regressed to pre- treatment activities. After treating him again, my report

states 'prognosis for a final cure is dismal. The subject, when under extreme stress, can reverse his progress and quite possibly break'," she quoted.

"Thank you doctor. So what, you may ask." There was no reply. "Doctor, what are the chances that he, under great stress and in charge of a large group, might regain his delusions of grandeur and try to emulate someone like Hitler?" ask Louie.

"Very good, I think," she offered.

"I can tell you he has," he stunned the audience. Before anyone could react, he quickly elaborated on his statement. "About a half hour ago, I tried to contact Tearle. He refused. But, as he did so, he let me in enough to see that he has cracked, and its much, much worse than any of you can imagine."

He waited a few moments to let that sink in before continuing. "He has cracked, and he has started some kind of warlike state. He has armed the natives with advanced weaponry, taken over 1/3 of the planet, and seems to be planning one big try for total control soon. All I can tell you is that the Second is called Linneaus by the natives, and they are technologically in the middle ages. They will be totally contaminated at the very least, within eleven hours, and may even be enslaved by then. We must get there before then. Rueben, how soon can we get there?"

"Twelve hours at the least," he whispered.

"You have to do better than that," ordered the President.

"Twelve hours is the best I can do. That includes a limited point to point transfer that is extremely risky. Most of the time is going to be spent slowing to orbit the planet."

"Why not transfer directly to the planet?" asked Lee.

"You see what happens when we exit a wormhole. If we came out too close to the planet, the emissions would fry the life on the planet which we are trying to save," countered Rueben.

"So there is no way we can be there any sooner?"

"No, I don't think so, but I will check things out."

"Oh. I guess we have no choice then but to take twelve hours. I only hope they can persevere until then."

CHAPTER FORTY ONE

Tearle looked at the latest reconn data with glee. He had captured the northern continent. Soon, he will be in control of the entire planet, he hoped.

"Sir," began his Sergeant, "we have completed training the troops on how to operate the rifles. Shall we begin training them in grenade usage?"

"Of course, and after that you will instruct them in usage of gas masks," ordered Tearle.

Yes Sir," exhorted the Sergeant as he spun on his heels and left to train the "volunteers".

Tearle returned to the recon data and the map of the enemy positions. He was very impressed with the size army the southwestern nation was fielding against the southeastern nation. He made some quick calculations and determined the battle between the two would be at its height tomorrow afternoon. It would be the perfect time for him to attack, when the enemy is divided and engaged. He called a logistics directory from his pocom. His stores were tremendous. He had almost 700,000 people, literally at his disposal. He had that many rifles, half that many grenades, yet only one-eighth as many gas masks. The gas he manufactured was the deadly T. S. O., used successfully by S. F. In. F. E. in 2050 - 2052. Although Tosbow production was halted immediately upon unification of Earth, there were still a few sites where barrels of the toxin could be found. With the aid of an old MilCenCom (Military Central Computer), he had tracked down the location of several dozen. He and fellow members of O. D. O. R. (the Organization Demanding Old Rules) seek a return to the glory days of imperialism and world conquest before the imposition of unification. After Earth was unified, all armed services were disbanded, and the weapons of mass destruction were melted and became raw materials for the "surge to the stars". The U. E. F. had no place for the 34 million members of the armed services. They filled the unemployment and workfare services. 90 percent were successfully "programmed" for civilian life. The remaining 10 percent could not get the urge to kill or the desire to design greater weapons of mass destruction out of their minds. These people eventually withdrew into their own little worlds, and small Pacific island nations sprang up occasionally. Using various means, they came together and formed the alliance Odor.

For two years he plotted and waited for the time to be right. Finally, an opportunity presented itself. Tearle was contacted in March of 2054 to provide security on the upcoming flight to Vega. The chance to establish an order on a foreign world far from Earth appealed to Odor. Quietly, the group aligned itself to be in position to constitute nearly half of the *Phobos'* rew. It was pure luck that the natives attacked upon crash landing, and even better when Paul split the group and gave Tearle his half. Their dream was being realized.

Tearle was troubled nonetheless. If he attacks too soon and without the proper training, the green draftees might break and give up the fight. Another variable he dealt with was what kind of weapons should he equip them with. Should he send the draftees into battle with muskets and rifles, or tanks, planes, and atomic bombs? The factor was the lag time in production of the weapons. Not knowing how long it would be before the rescuers would try to establish order, he decided upon a three-track approach to the problem. Since relatively low tech weapons could be produced quicker than higher

tech items, he opted for producing nearly as many of those as he could. While producing less of them than he could, he used the left over production capacity to slowly build high tech machines. Thus, if the rescuers came quickly, he would at least have an army equipped with rifles. And as their arrival was delayed, more mid tech weapons would be on line, and maybe a few high tech weapons would be ready. With Linneaus' low tech level even a few weapons of mass destruction would suffice to conquer it.

The biggest variable of all were the rescuers. How soon would they arrive, he wondered. Depending on their arrival time, they might find Tearle at some point along the way to total control. Tearle hoped they do not arrive until after his goal is reached. If they arrived at the beginning of the battle, they might resist him. He was sure they were carrying no weapons. It is expressly forbidden in the Compact to transport weapons. Besides, he thought, they had no indication he would do this. What then could they do? Satisfied they could do nothing, he returned to studying the pictos of the enemy.

CHAPTER FORTY TWO

As Tristan's armies drew closer, I had Joe distribute the arrows and bolts to Theseus' forces while I flew a recon of not this area, but rather Tearle's capital - Nilreb. I could easily spot the roughly 3/4 of a million men. As I flew closer, I could see that these men had not swords and arrows, but rather rifles. And what was that? Grenades? I quickly imaged the scene and zoomed in on the details. All of them had rifles, and yes, grenades were being thrown unskillfully. The grenades did not shock me as much as the rifles. Even Theseus had crude examples of grenades.

I searched the area, but could not find where the arms were manufactured. Then I realized they were built in the same way I made the arrows for Theseus. This meant that Tearle must have had a rifle and grenade on him when he was on ship. But how did he get it on board when all weapons are outlawed? This was the contamination that Louie feared most. I recorded what I could and sped back to base, eager to see what else I might see after computer enhancement.

To my horror, the thematic imager showed what looked like a wooden plane under construction. Although it appeared to be a world war two class vehicle, upon extreme magnification I discerned that it was E. M. P. hardened. The last year any vehicle was hardened to withstand the pulse radiation from a nuclear explosion was in 2041, after the American - Soviet war of that year. With the plane exhibiting characteristics enabling it to fight on a nuclear battlefield I realized what Tearle intended to do. There could only be one usage for such a weapon, and it's intended target would be the rescuers and my group. With Tristan's forces less than 1/2 hour away, and Tearle training his for what probably will be a battle for control of the planet, an ominous feeling swept over me. The whole planet was heading for one big social, ecological, and environmental convulsion. The thought of it made me pass out.

I was awakened a few moments later by Cheryl gently caressing me and whispering softly..

"Honey, are you all right?" she asked with genuine concern.

"Do you remember the war of 41?" I asked ignoring her question.

"Of course, I was 19 and engaged to Fredr.." her voice trailed off to silence. "Why?"

"Do you remember the fallout?" I led the question.

"There wasn't any," she recalled.

"Oh yes there was," I countered.

"Huh?" she asked.

"There were a few deaths from it in the U. S., but Russia was very nearly depopulated. Do you know why?"

"No," was her only reply.

"At the time, I worked with the N. W. C. A. while my brother worked at Zeros. We at Nowca were given the task of decontaminating the area hit and to prevent fallout from the Mirvs from reaching inhabited areas. You never saw fallout?" I asked.

"No."

"That's because we did a great job. Unfortunately, Russia did not have a weather controlling medium. Fallout quickly saturated the nation. Though only 40 million were killed in the initial blast, the fallout killed many more. At first it seemed as though no one won the war, but within 5 years, almost 80 million died from radiation poisoning. The horror of it led to the outlaw of nuclear weapons in '47."

"Yeah, so what's your point?" she hated history lessons from me.

"Well, since we controlled the fallout and developed the genetic corrections to damaged cells, you were not exposed to the awful consequences of nuclear war."

"Oh come on, I'm not naive," she interrupted. "I know what kind of destruction those things were capable of."

"Agreed. Then let me show you something," I offered as I displayed the picto of the plane Tearle has under construction. "I took this 20 minutes ago," I said as I looked at the chrono. "But that's not in and of itself important. What is, is this," I showed the

image of the fiber optical avionics bundle. "This is E. M. P. hardened," I announced and awaited her question.

"What?" she asked knowing it would lead somewhere important.

"Electromagnetic pulse radiation. A by - product of a nuclear blast, it projects a momentary surge at the planet's surface, causing non - protected electronics to fail. Things like pocoms, transports, replicaters, etc."

"This plane is hardened in such a way as to allow it to continue operating even after a nuclear blast," I explained.

"So?" this time she led me.

"In '49 the last nuclear device was sent to the sun. Since then, there has been no need to protect against E. M. P., so nothing is equipped with hardening anymore. Except this plane is, and do you know who has it?"

"Tearle?" she asked cautiously.

"He's planning on fighting on a nuclear battlefield and prevailing. That battlefield is here," I proclaimed somberly.

Cheryl was speechless before the realization hit her. She began to cry. "I don't want to lose you," she hugged me lovingly.

"Nor I you," I offered as we hugged each other for a very long time.

CHAPTER FORTY THREE

"There they are," yelled the north tower guard. From his vantage point atop the complex, he could see the enemy walking towards him. The 35,000 troops reached their assigned points and they quickly spread out and surrounded the castle. The ringing of the Cathedralis' bells warned us of their arrival. As agreed, I quickly took off in the trans and proceeded to my observation ceiling of 350 Meters. From there I watched the battle as it unfolded.

Tristan's northern army, under the command of Sir Neilson, met Theseus' forces. Rapidly, several scalers were brought by slaves to the outer wall. Once it was fastened to the wall, many troops filled the huge stair-like structure and made their way to the top. Just before they would have reached the top, Sir Hendriks poured oil lit by phosphorus onto the structure. Immediately, it burst into flames. Many troops were burned, and those that escaped the fire by jumping were injured by the 30 Meter fall. Hendriks' missiliers easily killed their prey. Neilson abandoned that part of the plan and proceeded with the second phase.

Sir Cadmus prepared his scaler/bore for his attempt to reach the top wall. As they moved their equipment forward, catapults rained huge stones upon the defending force to provide covering fire for the slaves pulling their load. Most of the rocks merely bounced off the 4 meter thick walls, and debris rained upon their own forces, slowing the advance and aiding the defenders. Realizing this, Cadmus had his troops withdraw to a safer position until the bombarding stopped. This exposed the scaler to enemy attack, but Cadmus had constructed his machine differently than the rest. His scaler had a mounted ram and bore screw, to provide a duel threat - that of flanking over the wall or of punching through it. It was 3 meters taller than the wall it meant to breach. Cadmus placed 28 archers on top of it to harass the interior of the castle and to prevent the enemy from defending against it. He also had it armored, at a significant weight penalty. This doubled the slaves necessary to push it, but the scaler would be impervious to attacks.

Sir Tenise was not having good luck at all, conversely. I watched in amazement as his slaves pulled a scaler towards the outer wall when suddenly the ground beneath it opened and swallowed the machine. Through an incredible lack of planning or something, the slaves pulled the scaler directly over one of the tunneling attempts, and caused it's collapse. Neither the machine or the mine were viable threats anymore.

Lord Tristan was a scared man. First, Theseus evaded engaging him at the border. Then one of his scalers was burnt prior to its use. And now another scaler was put out of action by the ineptitude of his own troops. And to top it off, it collapsed one of his mines, killing two birds with one stone! Still, Tristan did have all the numbers going for him. The surprise was gone, if not actually reversed. For the first time, he thought this battle might end like all of the rest - a draw.

CHAPTER FORTY FOUR

The peasants assembled in the courtyard to see the execution of the spies. Like all killings, this was treated by them as a time of festivity. They rarely had the opportunity or the reason to party, so when they did, they really whooped it up. All except for one family, though.

Late the night before, some guards came and took the Miller family's oldest daughter - Michelle. They gave no reason for their abduction of her, so the family could only assume she had done something wrong, and they would hear about it in the morning. The only thing they heard in the morning was that there would be three killings, and one was to be female. So when the call came for them to attend, they did not, fearful of what they might see. If they had shown up, they would have known the reason their daughter was taken from them.

With the crowd anxious, the brilliantly clad executioner walked to the block and set it up. Then he grabbed his favorite weapon, a large axe with a sliding lead weight attached to the top, and proceeded to test it on a large squirming pig. It was a clean slice, and he

threw the meat to the waiting audience. Kill, kill, kill, rose the chanting group. Obliging, he ordered the first prisoner to the stalk.

Vladimir was totally disoriented and in shock. Being hooded, unable to see, and prodded in various places, all the while being pushed up stairs, and finally on a wooden stage. Foreign words chanted repeatedly crushed all thought in volume. Then, as a different pattern to the noise was felt, he was pushed in a bent over position and a head ring was placed around his neck. He could not get away from the binding force. The noise, the fear, and the terror of it made him puke.

The crowd grew silent. His best opportunity passed, the executioner hurriedly yet skillfully put all of his weight into his attack. The axe blade bit through 5/8 of Vladimir's neck before aided by the impact of the "finishing" stone. The caped figure reached down and grabbed the separate head and flung it into the audience. A fight broke out over who would get the prized "head stew".

While the crowd was verbalizing it's joy, the composters took the remains to the pile of fertilizer which was used to grow the food prisoners ate!

Ashford Thornbe was next. He was similarly treated on he stage, and the fear in him was dominant. As he was hinged, he quickly noticed the smell. It was a smell he had sensed recently. It was in the dungeon. It was death. He elieved himself through all three orifices. He was unable to catch his breath from the chunks he blew, before he too as decapitated.

After his body was taken care of, Chloris sadly looked ut the opening of her room and watched as the peasant girl who replaced her was brought to the ring. She tried to empathize with her, but Chloris was unskilled at such. The men in the crowd became angry upon seeing that a woman was being murdered, especially one as potentially bountiful as Michelle appeared. It did not matter, for what is decreed occurs. The executioner ignored the boos and with more conviction than ever before, swung down hard and at an angle, sending her head flying into the crowd! Chloris turned away and wept for a long, long time.

CHAPTER FORTY FIVE

The battle for the Cathedralis raged at a fervor pitch for nearly four Linneatian hours. Then a lull descended upon the battlefield as both sides tallied their losses and examined the tactical situation. On Theseus' side, the losses were relatively light, although because of his fewer forces, the effect was greater. Over 2000 of the defenders lay dead, wounded, or missing. Almost 1/8 of Theseus' forces were therefore out of action.

Tristan's forces had broken through two of the four primary walls. The Secondary wall was nearly undermined, but successful counter-mining staved off collapse of it. His losses were massive, though because of his larger force, the overall effect was not too

great. 8,547 lay wounded, dead, or missing. This amounted to less than 1/10 of his force. Not one of his undermining attempts worked. This alarmed Tristan. Again, his nemesis seemed to have all of the luck. But Tristan has a few surprises up his sleeves.

Even now, while a temporal lull was in effect, Tristan was readying what he hoped would be the penultimate weapon, a huge catapult towering nearly 100 meters into the air. From its hidden construction site in the woods, when complete, it can hurl a boulder weighing a ton into the heart of the enemy. And at one boulder every eight minutes, Tristan can bombard Theseus into submission. Because of his pet weapon, he was in no hurry to quicken the pace of battle. Actually, he felt he could afford to stall it for a while. There were three reasons for this. One was that his forces could use the rest. The notion that he did not care about his troops was just propaganda put out by Theseus. Secondly, the catapult will not be complete until the next afternoon. Third, and most importantly, he wanted Theseus to suffer. A victory over Theseus would be no victory at all unless Theseus suffered grimly. Tristan would make sure he did.

The lull lasted until sunset, when traditionally all fighting stops, not to be continued until sunrise. About two hours before sunrise, I awoke and convened a meeting of the defense council. Situated along the huge u-shaped table were Theseus, Hendriks, Eaker, Cheryl, and myself.

"As you know," began Theseus, "sunrise is in two hours. The battle will begin shortly thereafter. Eaker, how's the morale of the troops?"

Eaker cleared his throat and spoke in his normal high pitched quiet voice. "The guards are all geared up for the battle. On the other hand, the recruits are disillusioned and, I have to tell you, some are even deserting."

"What?! People are leaving me in my time of greatest need? They should be axed!" commanded Theseus.

"If you wish, then so be it," answered Eaker.

"Hey, wait a minute," interrupted Cheryl. "Just because they deserted doesn't mean you can have them shot, so to speak," she contended.

Theseus was visibly uncomfortable. Women were never allowed in this room, let alone allowed to speak here. It was only as a personal favor to me that she was present. I could tell Theseus was regretting his decision. "Why not? Anyone who deserts me doesn't deserve to live beneath me."

"Why do you think they deserted?" she turned the question around.

"I don't know. Maybe they're too chicken to fight for their homes," put forth the leader.

"I'll bet they're just afraid they'll die. How many civies die in battle if they don't fight? One, two, maybe four? If they don't fight they live. You've already lost 1/8 of your forces. Those are not good odds to your normal peasant. Faced with a 15% casualty rate I'd desert too," she maintained.

"Cheryl's right," I supported her. "Maybe the peasants do not know what it will be like to live under 'Lord Tristan's' rule? Not knowing what it would be like, I'd probably take a chance on living under Tristan, rather than not living at all."

"O. K., belay that order Eaker," agreed Theseus. "Hendriks, how long will the walls last?"

The banter continued for another 1/2 hour or so, while Cheryl and I discussed the situation. Knowing we would be helped by prolonging the battle, we talked about various ways of doing so. Then she hit upon the big one. It's obviousness deceived me at first, so I quickly dismissed it. But as she offered more advantages, I knew it would work.

"Excuse me," I interrupted. "If we understand you correctly, there will be no battle if the sun does not rise?"

"That's correct, but why wouldn't Xanthias rise?" asked Theseus.

"I'm not saying it won't, but what if it were to be cloudy, or rainy. Would the fight be taken up in the morning?"

"No, we don't fight in the rain," professed Hendriks.

"Good, that's what we wanted to hear. We can state there will be no battle then, as we shall make it rain," I offered.

"But how? It hasn't rained in months," asked Theseus.

"We have ways of controlling the weather. I am quite proficient at it. We can delay the battle for you."

"What good would that do?" asked Eaker.

"The longer this battle lasts, the greater the likelihood our rescuers will arrive and put things right. Once they arrive, all battle on Linneaus will cease. Our job is to make sure the battle lasts until they arrive."

"And you're sure you can do it?" asked Theseus.

"Absolutely."

"Then get to it," he commanded.

"Yes, your 'Lordship'," I mocked his ordering of me. Cheryl and I left for our quarters and put together the C. W. C. (Compact Weather Controller). We installed the device into the trans, and went through the usual preflight procedures. Cheryl discovered that the unit needed calibration, however. I had forgotten that the last time it was used was on Mars, and the climate here was much different from there. We set about the task of recalibrating it, when not five minutes into the process, the Linneatian equivalent of a chicken announced the beginning of the day. We were too late to prevent the start of battle. Soon, small boulders from Tristan's catapults flew into the courtyard. We entered the trans and headed for a safe spot to continue the rain making process.

CHAPTER FORTY SIX

Both sides greeted the battle refreshed and with enthusiasm. On the ground, Tristan's forces rallied against the defenders. As the sun rose higher in the western sky, the immense catapult was illuminated brilliantly. At 3/4 complete, it was already 80 meters tall - 10 taller than the trees. It was seen from the Cathedralis for the first time, and a sense of dismay overcame the defenders. Within an hour, the secondary wall was infiltrated, and Tristan's forces surged through the opening. Hendriks withdrew behind the safety of the last wall. Satisfied the last of his living units were safely behind the wall, he ordered the flood gates open. Tristan's forces were standing in the middle of a dry canal. The water surged past the open gates and into the canal, drowning thousands of the attackers. Facing Tristan was a deep canal, flanked on one side by a high wall he controlled, and on the other side by a wall controlled by Theseus. Tristan had overlooked the possibility of water crossing, and was now faced with no other choice but to lay siege to the Cathedralis.

CHAPTER FORTY SEVEN

Around noon, we finally accomplished the calibration of the C. W. C. It took so long because of the enormous differences between our home on Mars and Linneaus. Linneaus revolves in the opposite direction. And with a day of only eight standard hours in length, the rotational energy of the planet whipped winds to near thunderstorm strength. This tends to disperse any rain clouds we developed. When Cheryl and I tried a test squall centered over the Cathedralis, the winds and Coriolis effect blew it into the mountains, where it dissipated.

"Its a good thing Theseus was not counting on me to save the day," I remarked upon our failure.

"Hey, how could we have known it would be so difficult to control the weather here?"

"I don't know. I had kind of thought about this the other day when Louie contacted me. I should have started thinking about it then," I lamented.

"Hey, don't take it so hard Pauly. We'll just have to come up with another solution, that's all."

"I'm sure we'll find some way of keeping things going until Louie arrives. What gets me is what Theseus is thinking right now. I hope he hasn't lost trust in us," I remorsed.

"You know what you need?" asked Cheryl?

"No, what," I became depressed.

"You need cheering up, and I have just what the doctor ordered," she advanced as her hands reached out and grabbed me enticingly.

I ordered the navcom to land in the mountains. Upon landing, Cheryl took my hand and led me to a small clearing. There we had an intimate picnic like the ones we used to have on Mars while we were dating each other. We feasted on each other many times, to the point of exhaustion.

Many hours later, we hiked to the top of the hill, and could see the Cathedralis from our vantage point. But off in the distance, we could see a large object towering over the woods. We looked at each other, silently exchanging thoughts. We went to the trans and flew a reconn of the structure. As we neared the machine, its purpose became apparent. It was a huge catapult, and large erratics were piled near it. We took a few pictobytes and headed for the Cathedralis.

"Look, honey, the attack's stalled," she observed and pointed to the castle. Between two castle walls a canal was flooded, and we could see that it separated the opposing forces. I noticed Tristan had no river crossing capability. The attack was stalled. I yelled in glee, reached back and kissed my wife, and landed the trans in the Cathedralis.

"This means the war," confessed Theseus upon seeing the pictos of the hurling machine.

"No it doesn't," I countered.

"With a catapult like that, he can bombard me into submission."

"No he can't - well, I take that back," I paused. "He can - if you let him. But you don't have to."

"What can I do against that?" he asked.

"Look, the only thing that thing can do is lob a few rocks into the courtyard. The odds are, it won't kill many troops, so your fighting ability will remain intact."

"So what? If he bombards the Neilso out of this place, what would be left to fight for?"

"O.K., theres something you're going to have to know and do if you want to survive this shitty excuse for a war. The first thing I want you to do is to take away the freedom your people enjoy."

Theseus started to protest, but I angrily cut him off.

"Wait! Let me explain first. You keep telling me about the tyranny Tristan's people live under. Yet many of your people respond with apathy, sarcasm, and by deserting you. The only way you're going to get their help is to take away their freedom - only for a limited time though. Once they appreciate how good of a leader you are, they'll do anything for you. Now then, this brings me to a second point. On Earth, we have fought thousands of wars, of much greater destructive power than this. In all of the wars my people have fought, only a very few defenders have been bombarded into submission. And not one defender has surrendered when no enemy forces were in a position to occupy a territory after bombardment," I said ignoring W.W.II Japan. "What I'm trying to say is this - long range artillery may bomb the hell out of you, but if he can't move in to take the town, then you will likely prevail."

"Can you show me examples?" asked Theseus.

I called 'lil Pete and had the libcom access World War II data. On the screen, pictures showed the Luftwaffe bombing London during the blitz. Theseus could not comprehend the destruction being unleashed, but he could tell a substantial portion was engulfed by flames.

"As you can see, the enemy did a good job on the city. Yet, this city survived because the attacker had no way of physically occupying the city," I twisted a few facts. "Not only that, but this city prevailed and eventually won the war!"

A glimmer of hope arose in Theseus' eyes. "How long do we have to hold out before your help arrives?"

"Two and a half days."

"I don't know, it seems like such a long time."

"Yes, it is. But with my help you can survive this little skirmish and see the beginning of a new order on your planet."

"About this idea of limiting my people's freedom. How should I go about that?"

"I'll leave that up to you, but I do have some examples I can show you of people like Hitler, Stalin, and Xong."

"When your people arrive, can I kill Tristan?"

The thought shocked me. How barbaric, I thought. "No, that's another matter. When help arrives, you're going to have to make peace with one another. There will be no more wars on Linneaus."

The joy on Theseus' face was replaced with an obvious pout.

"Of course," I continued, "I could always let you finish this war without our help and then pick up the pieces after you have no power left," I threatened.

"That's blackmail," exclaimed Theseus.

"It's also reality. You either end all of your differences when help arrives, or we let you destroy each other and then pick up the pieces. Either way, the end result is the same—peace."

Theseus said nothing, and an ominous silence descended upon us. I noticed a distinct change in his attitude towards me after that. I felt we were no longer friends. As I turned to leave, I left Theseus with one last thought.

"Take away their freedom, otherwise you'll lose them to their fears."

He did not reply.

CHAPTER FORTY EIGHT

Later that afternoon, the church bells rang loud, calling the inhabitants to the Cathedralis. When all but the minimum defense requirements were assembled, Theseus stepped out from behind the altar and strode superiorly to the podium. "Friends, Knights, peasants, and the like," he began in a powerful voice. "I have an important announcement to make. It has come to my attention that many of you recruits and volunteers are deserting. I have even heard talk of a separate peace with Tristan from some of you. This disturbs me greatly. It is not for fear of losing you, rather fear that you do not understand what you're getting yourself into. Many of the deserters are crying for peace at any price. They will go so far as to give their freedom up, and yours too. Therefore, I would like to demonstrate to you what life will be like should Tristan rule. For two hours, all freedoms shall be eliminated. I proclaim myself as king, with all

rights inherent in that title. All 16 -22 year olds are hereby drafted. A 5% tax on all transactions will be enacted to pay for this war. I recognize only one religion - that of Searling the Great. The practicing of other religions will not be tolerated. The civil council is abolished, as well as the popular court. I will make the laws. I will decide right from wrong. All rights are subject to my disapproval. It is my hope that after finding out what life is like under Lord Tristan, you'll fight for your rights. We are about to face our toughest battle. Soon, a huge catapult will hurtle large rocks into the center of our complex. Unless we are determined to endure and 'take it', we will not survive. That is why I am undertaking this great experiment. As of now, this castle is under my direct control!"

"Fuck you," yelled someone from the crowd."

"You have forgotten," boomed Theseus, "that you no longer have the right to speak. You must be punished and an example made of you. Guards, take him away!"

Eaker and Sirius made their way through the crowd and apprehended the dissident.

"There will be no more outbursts like that or I will have to punish you all!"

At the back of the crowd, a man began to protest, but his neighbor stopped him from continuing. "What do you want to do, ruin it for us all?" asked the neighbor.

"He can't do that, it's against the law."

"There is no law. If you want to commit suicide, do it alone. I don't want to go down with you."

The above conversation was repeated throughout the crowd. Theseus dismissed them, and they went about their chores.

After they left, I knocked on his door. He answered promptly.

"You were excellent," I complimented him.

"Thanks."

"I mean it. I haven't heard a speech like that since the Unification."

"I could learn to like this sort of thing - what'd you call it?"

"A dictatorship."

"Right. Those tapes you showed me helped a lot."

"I figured they would. But remember, it's always easier to be a dictator than a freedom leader," I cautioned.

"So I've found out. I used to think Tristan was so strong because he was a dictator. Now I know how weak he really is."

"Lesson one complete," I verified.

Theseus was silent for a few minutes before speaking again. "How's the rock shelters coming?"

"They're finished. When the rocks fly, all you have to do is send the civies downstairs and they'll be all right."

"Good. Now what about this surprise you were telling me about earlier," pressed Theseus.

"I talked to Eaker earlier and we've agreed upon a plan of attack."

"Well, tell me."

"Eaker is to lead a raiding party under the moat and behind enemy lines. The raiders will be mostly draftees."

"Why? They're untrained. They'll be massacred."

"Basically, yes. But it will do two things. One, it will rattle Tristan's bones knowing you can still attack. This may result in his infuriation, which in turn may lead him to make rash decisions."

"Such as.."

"Well, psyops might cause him to try to swim his troops across the now polluted moat, or it might even hopefully cause him to use the catapult beyond its capacity."

"O.K."

"Two, it'll help prove the point we're trying to make about freedom. Under a free government such as yours, you ask for volunteers and recruits. Under a dictatorship, the people get drafted regardless of their will to fight. After this is over, you can show your people the advantages your system has."

"Sounds good. When will Eaker lead the attack?"

"After the bombardment begins."

"Why?"

"In order for Tristan to use his machine, he'll have to withdraw his forces a bit, because he can't be sure it has much accuracy. When he does that, it will create a vacuum with which Eaker's forces will fill."

"Looks like its Tristan's move then," responded Theseus.

"That it is," I agreed.

CHAPTER FORTY NINE

When the two hours were up and the expected bombardment had not yet come, Theseus declared the 'great experiment' would continue. One result of this decree was the near quadrupling of the treasury. I urged Theseus to pay his real troops for the services thus far rendered. Even after paying them, there was still more money left. The sales tax was bringing in more money than he could spend. My government could use a few lessons from his, I thought to myself.

The day grew late, and I wondered whether Tristan's catapult was ready. Just then, my trans' collision avoidance system alerted me of an incoming object. It was headed for the southwest barracks, and the trace of the parabolic course showed the launch point to be the catapult. I rushed to the window just in time to see the huge rock drive down through the roof of the quarters and impact the stone floor. The impact shattered the missile, spewing debris throughout the building. A few unfortunates were caught in the wake of the shrapnel, and they lay dead. The bells rang forth, issuing a call to the people to head for the hastily constructed shelters.

The draftees were scheduled to begin their attack concurrently with the arrival of the boulders. Cheryl and I went to see how things were progressing on that end of things. When we arrived at the assembly point, Eaker was addressing the troops.

"...we cross beneath the moat here," he pointed to a map on the table before continuing. "Then we proceed under cover of the aqueduct until we reach the clearing - here. From there we'll be able to spot any weaknesses in Tristan's forces. When we spot them, we simply attack and exploit their weakness."

"What is our objective?" asked a young man.

"To harass the enemy," was the brief reply. "Now, if there are no more questions, we move at once.."

There were none. Eaker motioned for the draftees to form up outside the barracks, while the three of us conferred.

"They look smart," I offered.

"Yeah, they might even do some real damage - wouldn't that be ironic?" asked Eaker.

"Why?" asked Cheryl.

"Well, the only reason we're doing this is to upset Tristan and to shock us. Otherwise, these untrained people are useless to the war effort. If, somehow, they are able to gain a tactical advantage, that's an added plus. Instead of dying as martyrs, they'll die as heroes. Either way, the end result is the same. Tristan gets mad, our peasants support the war, and these men die," was Eaker's reply.

"You know, you just might have something there," I offered as I grabbed the map and studied it with the practiced eye of a warrior. "Look Eaker, instead of attacking there, why don't you advance under cover of these trees. Then, swing around on the right and attack these reserve forces here. There's a dam nearby, and I bet they're using the water as a supply source. If you defeat them, and take out the dam, all of the reservoir will be released. Judging from the contours of the land, it looks like the flood will follow this course, cutting these several hundred off from the action. With no river crossing capabilities, they'll either have to swim for it - which means some might drown. The rest could be picked off by archers, or stay and wait for the flood to recede. So now your meaningless meander has been transformed into a tactical victory - and at no real cost, since they are, after all, draftees."

"You're right Paul. I'll tell them about it right away. Meanwhile, you two had better take cover from the rocks," warned Eaker.

Oh no, I had forgotten about that. How long had it been since the last attack? 4, 5, or 6 minutes? I did not know. Grabbing Cheryl's hand, we ran to the safety of the trans. Once harnessed, we took off to the sound of the C.A.S. wailing ominously. Instinctively, I kicked on the S.R.B.s and we were flung out of harm's way. Looking back, we saw a huge crater where our trans had been parked. That was close, and both Cheryl and I breathed a sigh of relief. These trans' were strong, but not strong enough to survive impact with a two-ton rock. As I turned to return to the Cathedralis, the fuel alarm made itself heard. After many days of flight, my flying days were soon to end. Not wanting to return to the castle where an errant boulder might demolish my vehicle, we headed for the mountain where we set up the C. W. C. earlier. We will have to spend the rest of the war there until the catapult gets taken out.

CHAPTER FIFTY

The signal for the attack sounded, and Eaker's troops sallied forth to engage the enemy. Tristan's forces were completely caught off guard. Within minutes the dwarf's forces penetrated the line near the dam. Shortly thereafter, they breached the dam and a torrent of water flowed between hills and cut off Tristan's units. Unexpectedly, they chose to surrender rather than swim across the raging river.

This so infuriated Tristan that he ordered the bombardment to be increased. The firing rate of the catapult was gradually increased to one rock every minute- and -a- half. After the eighteenth such boulder, the slaves became tired. Hauling up the twentieth rock, halfway to the top, four of the slaves passed out from over exertion. This led to an increase in the load that each of the remaining slaves had to endure. Being already overworked, they could not handle the extra load, and the line securing the missile slipped through their hands, gnashing and scraping skin off everyone's hands. The clutch kicked in to stop the fall of the cargo, as designed. However, because it had been conceived under the pretexts that only 3/4 of the mass of each rock would need to be supported at any one time, the unit snapped and the rock plummeted to the ground. It buried itself eight feet in the ground, with no consequential loss of lives. The three slaves killed were, of course, of no significance.

It took several minutes before the battery recovered from the initial shock of what happened. Tristan, broiling with anger, raced to the site, and drilled the commander in charge of operations.

"What the Neilso happened Sergeant?" he asked.

"My Lordship, I told you, uh, you said to increase the rate of firing," he wisely did not directly accuse his Lord of being in error. "These weak slaves could not handle it, and when a few of them keeled over, the rest let go of the rope. The machine failed to hold the rock, and there it is, on top of a couple slaves."

"Didn't the drawer foresee such a possibility?"

Quick to pass the blame, the sergeant told him no.

"Fine. Execute the drawer and the first twenty slaves which fell. Then load that rock and the next one and fire two at a time to make up for your delay," commanded the Lord.

"But my Lord, it's not designed for two at a time," he protested.

"What?" asked the astonished leader. "Another design error? Execute all who helped the drawer draw this debacle and do as I ordered anyway. What I command is law!" he proclaimed vehemently.

The Sergeant performed the executions as ordered, and then rounded up forty slaves. With fresh slaves, they were able to move the two projectiles into the sling and began to yank it to the top by pulleys. They arduously pulled it to the top, and began to swing it to get it to drop in the bucket. The kinetic energy of the swinging duo violated the braces' ability to accommodate the load, and the main beam snapped, releasing the pair. The rocks smashed through the floor and rocketed to the ground. Accelerated by gravity, they easily broke through many of the supports, with catastrophic results. For many kilometers the thunderous claps of timbers breaking boomed as the whole

machine disintegrated. Scores of slaves and troops were killed and wounded. Tristan, deprived of his pet weapon, halted further battle and laid siege to the Cathedralis.

While Tristan was sulking over his loss, Theseus was jubilant over his victory. People came out of their shelters and watched "Eaker's Sneakers" parade the captured prisoners past the Cathedralis to the stockade. After the second night came without bombardment, Theseus proclaimed the great experiment to be over, and all liberties were restored.

CHAPTER FIFTY ONE

Meanwhile, to the north, the coiled spring of Tearle's armies sprang outward at the nearby nations. Armed with rifles, Tearle's forces easily swept aside all resistance. By the beginning of the third day, he was poised at the triangle of free countries. It had taken most of the bullets produced to complete the takeover of 5/8 of the planet. His army stood on the edge of the two T's territories. The only thing keeping him from his ultimate goal was lack of munitions. His people had been highly wasteful of bullets, and now had none. Tearle regretted dividing his production capacity between low, mid, and high tech weapons. If he had put all of his production into bullets and grenades, the final assault would be in progress. He could not afford any delays. Already his astronomers detected the rescue ship, only 1 1/2 days away. He needs to be in full control of the planet before they arrive. Without hesitation, he ordered all low and high tech development to cease and switch over to producing bullets and grenades with one exception.

CHAPTER FIFTY TWO

With the advent of the fourth Linneatian day, Cheryl and I returned to the Cathedralis, having spent the past few days on the mountainside. A sense of normalcy permeated the surroundings. Were it not for the occasional dead animal catapulted into the courtyard one hardly noticed a war was going on. During this time, both sides took stock of their casualties, and reinforced their ranks. The armies were so preoccupied with each other that they did not notice the increasing incursions from the north.

During this period of relative calm, our group conducted various experiments on the natives. To our amazement, there were only three genetic codes different between us and the Linneatians. They were practically Homo Sapiens. This led of course to the inevitable question on how life arose here, and how it could be so similar to Earth. Not knowing anything about religion myself, I asked the only Theologian with us, and one of the few to claim to be one, to accompany me in interrogating Theseus.

"So Theseus, tell me about your planet?" asked Bishop Francis Scurra.

"What about it?" Theseus did not like the man.

"Well, how did life arise here?"

"The story varies from religion to religion. However, as I am the leader of this Theocracy, I make it a point to know all religions practiced in my domain. Though there are distinct differences between the old and new versions, they all seem to hold a few basic 'truths'. How we came to be on this planet is one of those understandings. According to my religion, there were people like us on Mysterio, a fourth lifesphere like ours. We were rafted there from a place far, far away from Xanthias, our sun. It is said Ornako, our leader at the time, had done something to anger the gods, and we were banished on Mysterio. They burned all of our rafts, and they sent Tristan's ancestors to punish us. Then Searling told of impending doom, and rescued my ancestors and put them here, on Linneaus. Neilso also put Tristan's kin here, and we have been fighting for centuries. Anyway, for some reason, Mysterio disappeared."

"It is given that we are descended from good, and Tristan, being supported by Neilso, is evil. It is also widely held that at one time, before we came to Xanthias even, that we had such powers as you. But these powers were taken from us when we were forced to live here by our Gods. It is only recently that we have learned to work metals. And yet, I have the sole remaining artifact from the olden days." Theseus rose and walked to his closet. "It is said Theseus the first wore this to clear the once hostile land. When he died, he took the secret of this with him. No one has been able to wear it since," he said as he pulled out a phosphorescent suit very similar to the battle armor worn during the moon riots of '43. Theseus brought the armor closer for me to see. The suit's reflected light was highlighted in Theseus' envious eyes. I could see he was extremely proud of the outfit.

Theseus handed it to me, and I was amazed at how little it weighed. I examined it closely. There were no openings in the helmet, but a lot of strange things littered the torso and arms. The suit looked very functional, yet it was also very odd. There seemed no way to enter it. "Theseus, may I have my engineer look this over? We promise to be careful," I said sincerely.

"O. K., but don't damage it. It's the only thing from the old days any of us have."

"How long ago was this made?"

"I don't know, but Theseus the first was alive 10,000 Linneatian years ago," he said.

I was looking at an object 10,000 years old. One that was made by another civilization. One that was at least as technologically sophisticated as ours is today. Where are they now? Are the two T's the only remains of a once mighty civilization? Visions of "Chariots of the Gods" filled my mind. This Mysterio, could that be the asteroid field now? Who had moved them here, and why did they let their civilization decline to the point it is now? I did not have much time to contemplate my answer as I heard the sound of a prop plane in the distance get closer. Tearle had completed it sooner than I anticipated. Instinctively, I rushed to my trans, only to find it without fuel. I screamed in angst. Here I am, the only person on Linneaus who can do something about it and I'm grounded because of lack of fuel. Looking vainly upwards, I was reminded of those

famous words spoken by Snoopy after his Sopwith Camel was shot down by the Red Baron. "Curse you, Red Baron," I quietly whispered.

CHAPTER FIFTY THREE

Tearle was a happy man. After all, he conquered most of the world. All that stood between him and total control lay beneath him. Calmly, he recorded the pictobytes of the battlefield. His years of military training told him the armies below were locked in a state of stalemate. The lack of opposition was evident even from his height. Good, he thought, I'll catch them sleeping. Confident of his success, he halted further reconnaissance and flew back to base. So confident was he of victory that he neglected to look at the recon data he'd taken. It might prove to be a fateful mistake.

Later that night, Tearle ordered his troops to march towards the two capitals. It would be a moonwalk to take Tristan's city, as most of Tristan's forces were committed to Theseus' theater of operation. He timed the assault to arrive at each capitol two hours before sunrise, to catch everyone sleeping. As the night progressed, with the defenders oblivious to the attack, and Cheryl no where to be found, all was on schedule. Then a rare event occurred. It rained. The rivers swelled and overflowed their banks. Huge pluvial lakes appeared where only a parched flat field lay for months. The rain woke everyone in the Cathedralis and out on the battlefield. Both Tristan's and Theseus' armies were joyous. Now that they had a sustained rain, the fields could be planted soon. But the fields were in enemy held territory, and the mood quickly changed to depression in the Cathedralis. Both sides men wanted to leave to work the farms. I still had no idea where Cheryl was, and was becoming worried that she might be in danger from the floods. My worry was met by her joyfully returning from the mountains a while later, triumphant in her success.

"What'd you do, save the world?" I asked jokingly.

"I made the C.W.C. work, thats all," she said modestly.

I was surprised. We had worked three days straight before I had given up. "How?" was all I could ask.

"You worked out the principle yourself two days ago, I just couldn't remember exactly what it was, so I just input variables until it worked. Now there is a hurricane on the far side, and it's fragments are causing the rain."

I took a few seconds to analyze what she meant before responding. "How long will it last?"

"It should last a long time. You said that a hurricane likes to stay together. When we tried to get it to rain, we introduced a few squalls, one at a time. But they never lasted. I created six at once, and let the rotation pull them to the ocean side where they coalesced and fed a hurricane. You say a hurricane wants to stay together so even though it is fragmenting and sending showers our way, it also is building upon itself."

"But the showers that are here now will make it to the mountains. Then what will happen," I queried her.

"As these storms pass overhead and go to the mountains, most will be broken up. A few might survive to be whipped around and feed on the ocean. So what might happen is that two or more hurricanes could develop as time passes."

"Right, so because the system then becomes unstable, they'll all dissolve away, right?" I asked gaining an insight into her thinking.

"Yeah."

"Well, how long will it be before it stops raining?"

"I don't know, you're the expert, but I'll guess a day," she offered.

"Damn, you do good work," I commended her.

"I had a good teacher."

I looked at her ardently. "You know what rain does to me," I invited, arms outstretched. She closed the door and silked over to me, where we then made the bed.

"What shall we call her?" she asked remembering a conversation we had earlier regarding a baby. I simply smiled and we set about having a little girl this time.

CHAPTER FIFTY FOUR

While the rain was doing wonders for mine and Cheryl's love lives, it was hampering Tearle's military effort. Rivers and lakes formed where none had been only the day before. The whole ground turned to mud. And to top it off, his troops stopped and celebrated the rain. Needless to say, his offensive was stalled. By early evening, the rain let up and Tearle pushed his troops forward. He wanted to take the capitols two hours before sunrise the next day, otherwise it will be too late.

CHAPTER FIFTY FIVE

Late that night, while everyone else was asleep, I assembled our group for what I hoped will be the last planetbound meeting. When everyone was seated, I called the Congress to order. "As your leader, it is my duty to inform you of any new details regarding our stay here. Not wanting to 'mine around a crater', we're going to be rescued sometime t.r.w.," I waited for the response.

For a full five minutes, joyous activity erupted from everyone.

"We have survived a terrible ordeal whilst here on this planet. We survived the attack by Tristan's henchmen. We survived being likened to gods. We have survived the battle for the Cathedralis too," I summarized. "But there is yet one last battle we have to fight. Remember after the initial contact with 'his lord's' forces, we split into two groups - one commanded by me, the other by Tearle Durko. As you know, we lost contact with him shortly after our escape, and some of you thought his group might be deceased. And with the series of events here, we have had little opportunity to give them much thought. Well, I regret to tell you this was a big mistake on my part. While we were occupied here, Tearle and his group headed north and imposed themselves as leaders of the village. It appears he immediately set into play an armaments program."

Gasps of horror glistened in everyone's eyes.

"I have flown a reconn over his camp, and I am going to take this opportunity to share the pictos with you."

I dimmed the lights and projected the images onto a far stone wall. "As you can see, he has amassed a large army of about a million men. They are equipped with rifles and grenades. And, in this picto from a U.A.V. (unmanned aerial vehicle) taken yesterday, you can see several tanks near completion. However, you should note construction appears to have stopped on all of them." As I continued the lecture, I easily regressed to my professional role undertaken by me during the war of '50. A great sense of nostalgia surged in me. I have not felt this way since the war. I was in control.

"This next picto is very interesting," the image of Tearle's plane appeared on the wall. "That was taken two days ago. It is a non-standard prop plane. Some of the interesting things about it is it's wood construction, the size of the wings, the payload bay, presumably for a bomb, and most distressingly, this," and the image of the avionics suite was displayed. A few of the more knowledgeable people gasped disparagingly. "For those of you who do not know what this is, suffice it to say that this is the electronics that controls it. Without these controls this plane is unflyable. Some of you can tell what is unique about these avionics. They are E. M. P. hardened. E. M. P. stands for Electro -Magnetic - Pulse radiation. E. M. P. does not occur in nature, it's sole origin is manmade, and it results from the detonation of a thermonuclear device!" I slammed my fist hard onto the table for added effect. Boy, just like the old days, I stoically grinned to myself.

Of course, the reaction of the group was adamant. They all thought Tearle should be fried for building such a thing. Everyone knew nuclear weapons were basically outlawed in 2041.

Sensing control was slipping away, I quickly seized the initiative. "Hey, its O. K. That plane and it's payload is not meant for us... its meant for the rescuers. You see, by his plan, we'll all be dead by tomorrow, and he'll be in control of the planet when they establish orbit. He doesn't need that to force us, he can accomplish that with the rifles his army is equipped with. Today, probably around sunrise, he'll attack - yes, he's already surrounding us. There is no question in my mind that he can overwhelm the two T's forces. Unless we stop him, he will be in control of Linneaus by the time Louie arrives. Now how are we going to stop him?" I threw it open to debate.

Jack, our engineer, put forth the answer. "I believe I have the answer," he announced. "I've had the opportunity to dissect Theseus's armor, and I think I can duplicate it. I don't know that it will work, but at least it will look like it, and maybe we can bluff him into giving up."

"Jack, I looked at that suit. How do you even wear it, let alone use it?" I asked dispassionately.

"On visual examination it has a seamless entry system. They are activated by reading the correct index and thumb prints. By using the compulater, acom, and pocom, I was able to query it as to what the proper prints should be, and I made a facsimile." Jack pulled from his pocket a glove and put it on, then grabbed the luminescent suit and opened it. He stepped into it, and it sealed him in. A few moments later the helmet became translucent, and we could hear the breathing apparatus provide air for Jack. "This suit is a self contained spacesuit, but its made for an object with gravity but little atmosphere. I'd say it might have felt at home on an asteroid or small moon. Anyway, the imaging system is not unlike that in our trans'. I can see in holographic 3-D, near real time, real or false color images of you. I can move around like I'm floating on air. The suit gives one extraordinary strength," he demonstrated by lifting the solid oak-like table easily. There is also a weapons system, but I haven't got it to work yet," he admitted.

Nearly everyone was amazed that this relic worked, let alone as well as Jack described. Could the weapons work, can the suit be reproduced, how many, and who will get them, were questions answered eventually. The decision was made to replicate the suits. Now the decision on how to use them needed to be answered.

"I think there are some moral," man, I hated that word, "rather ethical questions that need to be addressed. The first is this - what will the natives think when they see us in these suits. Surely the 'gods' issue will be resurrected. And what about the battle itself? Are we condoning actually killing inhabitants of this planet, or are we to restrict ourselves to Tearle and his group? We have no right to kill anyone on this planet. But we do have jurisdiction over Tearle. They should be the only ones we deal with. Also,

Louie will be here tomorrow night. What do you suppose his reaction will be when he sees us in these suits shooting up people left and right? As it now stands, our contamination pales in comparison to Tearle's, so we'll probably get off easy. If we kill any Linneatians we'll fry just as sure as Tearle will. I agree we should use them, lets just use some judgement first," and I concluded my argument.

"As far as being likened to 'gods'," rejected Jack, "I don't foresee that as a possibility. After all, 'gods' don't go around killing theirs or any people. And if Tearle is one us, look what he's done. No, I don't think thats an issue at all."

I concurred, and we put it to a vote. It was unanimous. We adjourned the meeting and Jack prepared to replicate the suits.

As the night progressed, Tearle and his army moved closer. Refreshed by the rain, the army made better time than expected. Tearle ordered the troops to rest for a while before continuing. Then, at precisely two hours before sunrise, he launched his assault.

CHAPTER FIFTY SIX

I was asleep when the attack came. I was awakened by the sound of gunfire in the distance. Cheryl and I quickly dressed and ran to Jack's quarters. There were three suits, enough for Jack, Cheryl, and me. We donned the suits with Jack's help, and frantically tried to familiarize ourselves with their operation.

"Well honey, do we have a chance?" asked Cheryl.

"There is always a chance, even if it is in the billions to one," I mocked an old T. V. star of sorts my grandfather idolized.

Just then, Theseus burst into the room. It was like a brick hit him, the sight of the three of us in suits like his. "How the Searling did you get all those suits?" he asked disbelieving.

"It's not important," I avoided the question knowing he could not fathom the explanation. "What is important is that you offer no resistance. This is our battle, and I don't want any of you hurt because of us."

"Your battle?" he was confused. "If it's your battle then its mine too - after all, you helped me in mine, I can help you in yours."

I was impressed by Theseus' sense of honor. I had taught him well. Or had it always been there before I arrived? I did not know. All that mattered to me was that no

Linnaeatian dies because of us. "I am sorry Theseus, but I have to refuse your kind offer of help. I will explain later, but we must get going," and I addressed Cheryl and Jack. "O. K. Jack, it's your call," I offered.

"Let's fly," he proclaimed. He led the way through the maze of corridors that was the Cathedralis and exited near an observation tower. Looking at the battlefield, I was glad Tristan laid siege to us. It spared Theseus from the initial onslaught. While this was good for Theseus, it was bad news for Tristan's army. They bore the brunt of the battle. The casualties were great. Within 1/2 hour almost the entire army lay wounded, most mortally, medicine being the way it was. Tristan tried unsuccessfully to rally his troops. Desperation instead set in, so he ordered his knights to retreat to his now occupied capitol. Unfortunately, medieval warfare bunched things up, and one grenade took out all but one of his heralded knights. Seeing this, Tristan beat a hasty retreat to the moat separating him from Theseus.

"Please let me in," he asked fearful of what lay ahead.

I watched Theseus' reaction. He just smiled.

"Please Theseus, let me across, I beg you."

Still Theseus did nothing. The progress I had seen in him earlier seemed to fade. Maybe he just needed prodding, I thought.

"Why don't you let him across?"

"Why should I? He'd just as soon see me dead as I see him."

"But he's in trouble," I countered.

"So?"

"Remember you said you wanted to help? Well, you can do so by letting him across. It would be a great gesture on your part, and I'd be appreciative forever."

He continued to think about it as the marauders closed in on their target. "Let him cross," was the terse command Theseus let out.

"Thanks," and I patted him on the back.

"And when he gets across throw him in the dungeon," he rebuffed my arm.

Again my hope was dashed. Always it seems just as they make progress, they do something that spoils it.

It wasn't long before Tristan was across the moat. And just in time too, for Tearle's elite arrived at the opposite side and took shots at Tristan. Vainly, they tried to hit him, but Tearle designed them for close range. What a joke, I thought. It was like bringing a knife to a gunfight. As Tristan was led to the dungeon, I could see his whole army disintegrate. They were quickly taken care of in mopping up operations. Surprisingly, I noticed a small column of men quietly melting away from the battlefield. And it was flying Tristan's colors. I wondered what brave person led the group.

The severity of the onslaught had caught Sir Cadmus off guard. He, like the rest of Lord Tristan's army were sleeping when the attack came. Quickly and professionally he urged his troops to a concealed position. There he waited and let the enemy pass him by. They carried strange weapons which made a lot of noise, and killed people by invisible means. But they could be killed too, and his men set up a killing zone, and they shot arrows at all who entered it. Then the call to knights was sounded, and Sir Cadmus started to the rallying point. He was about 1/3 of the way there when the assemblage was blown up by a grenade. So he returned to his position, and told his unit that the battle was lost. He seized the opportunity to save himself, and he quietly retreated to the woods. When he was secure in the knowledge that he was far from the battle, he hoisted his colors and began the trek to the castle. Leadership would be his upon his arrival, he hoped.

CHAPTER FIFTY SEVEN

While Sir Cadmus thought he was doing something great, the rest of the knights thought he was a coward. But soon it did not matter what they thought, for they were now but a thought themselves. They had made the supreme sacrifice for their leader, they died.

The first phase went remarkably fast. In less than an hour, there was no resistance from Tristan's forces. Tearle quickly prepared for his second phase. He set up a large public address system, and he boomed surrender messages across the moat. To my surprise, Theseus did not waiver.

He walked defiantly to the edge of a wall and spit into the moat. I was impressed, but at the same time worried that he might do something foolish. Regardless of the carnage around him, he still might not grasp the force he was dealing with.

"Take it easy Theseus," I warned. "We don't want to make him blow his top," I cautioned knowing fully Tearle's potential.

"I'm not about to be pushed around," he retorted.

"This is our battle and that's final." It was the first time I gave him a direct order. The look in his eyes confirmed my mistake. Nevertheless, he acquiesced to my demands.

"Now is the time for us to find out if those suits work," I said as I led Cheryl and Jack to the bridge across the moat. "Tearle, this is Paul. I challenge you to a duel. Whoever wins gets the planet." It was a moot challenge, but I knew his ego would take it.

A duel? Tearle wanted to settle a few scores with me. He had been passed up for commander of the flight in favor of me. Then, when Jack turned down control over the group and I took over, he resented it. Now he could get his revenge. "You're on," he replied gruntingly.

Slowly, we crossed the bridge and landed on the other side of the moat. Immediately, we were swarmed by his forces, whom laughed at us for falling into their hands.

"Kill them," was Tearle's simple command. The men aimed their guns at the three of us and fired. The projectiles were caught by the mesh of the suit, causing us no harm. Because these were natives, we took no action. I needed to get Tearle closer.

"Come on homo, you and me, one on one," I offered the greatest insult of the 21st Century - that of being a homosexual. He properly got angry and assembled his closest of the group around him. It was five against three, not the best odds, nor the best of times. Indiscriminately, they fired upon us, not caring for the natives which had captured us. A few of them were hit by the laser weapons directly, and a few more were injured by the reflection off our suits. Tearle was surprised, and he ordered his four to go hand to hand with us. Now was when the fun began. Here was four against three in hand to hand combat, sporting 21st Century battlearmor and three duplicated 10,000 year old relics. We easily overpowered them in our assisted powersuits. But in the melee, Tearle had disappeared. I had a hunch of where he went, but there was nothing I could do about it. Still, the rescuers were only an hour away, and Tearle's attempt to control the planet appeared stymied. That is until, suddenly, the roar of a prop plane announced the arrival of Tearle and his plane. This time he was playing for keeps, and one could tell the engine was struggling with its massive load.

"Paul, I know you're listening," came his transmission. "Surrender immediately or else I'll fry everything for forty kilometers, and it will be all your fault!"

He was right, it would be. I could not allow the deaths of these people to be on my conscious. Reluctantly, I conferred with the rest of the group and received an unexpected answer - no! I radioed the news to him. He was adamant.

"Then you'll die," he screamed eerily as he began the arming preparations for his device.

CHAPTER FIFTY EIGHT

"Sir, we're within range of person to person communications with the planet. We're picking up something now."

Louie was elated. "Put them on the speakers," he ordered.

"...fry everything for forty kilometers, and it will be your fault!" came forth Tearle's angry voice.

All activities on the bridge ceased. The worst imagined scenario was overshadowed by reality. Louie could not believe his ears. While still in shock, my reply woke him up. Was Paul nuts? Why was he going to cause the death of others? What did Tearle have that can fry forty km? No, it couldn't be, he hoped. "Zumbruge, put me in contact with Paul. I demand to talk to him."

"Absolutely," was the reply.

Not long after Tearle's plane left, my pocom announced an incoming call.

"Jaffrin," I acknowledged.

"Paul, I'm astonished. Did I hear him say what I thought I did?" asked Louie.

"Louie, is that you?" I asked not sure if it was a trick or not.

"You know damn well it is, now what the fuck is going on," he was furious.

"Well, per our earlier conversation, Tearle attacked the final outcropping of defense today. We are at the only place he has yet to control, and my guess is he'll blow it rather than lose it. Lou, I think he has a nuke, he's hardened the plane, and it looks like it is capable of hauling one. I've got a trans, but no fuel. We're doomed without your intervention," I confessed.

"We're stabilizing our orbit now. How soon before he nukes the area?"

"He left a few minutes ago, I don't think it'll take long to arm it."

"We'll be stable shortly. Afterwards, we can intercept him."

"With what?"

"You know Al, we've got a few **Stillettos** just in case something like this greeted us. We needed insurance in case any of you claimed to be 'gods' or something."

"Which, I must say, brings us to the issue of contamination. I think it's hopelessly tainted. We're going to have to work closely with these people from now on," I commented.

"We'll see about that later. I'll be down in a few minutes."

CHAPTER FIFTY NINE

Several minutes later we heard the dual thunderclap of Louie's P.O.L. **Eagle** exit the sound barrier. As he descended to land, he could see the carnage of the battlefield. Hardened by the war of '50, he was used to megadeaths. But here he could not bear the sight of another helpless Linneatian. Louie felt saddened by what he saw. Once again, it seemed, Homo Sapiens had proven itself to be a violent species. This time, the stage was the universe, and the first contact with others showed the full range of wanton destruction humankind is capable of. Feelings of doubt surfaced in his mind about our ability to coexist in the universe without trying to impose our will on others as was done on Earth. As the founder of the United Earth Foundation, he too, was guilty of such a thing. But in the last few years he knew it was the right decision. Humanity needed to be united.

Spotting my fallen trans, he landed near it and slowly egressed. He looked really depressed. As I neared him, his blue eyes watered with the guilt that he as leader of humanity must hold. His eyebrows were tensed, and his constant smile was now a deep frown bordering on a pout. I could tell he was hurting inside, but I did not know what to say. I didn't have to say anything, as he spoke first.

"Paul, I'm going to kill Tearle if I have to ram his plane," he professed. He turned away before I could protest, and he climbed into his craft and powered it for flight. He quickly took off and began searching for Tearle's plane. A sense of relief swept over him as the nearly radar invisible wooden plane showed up on the scope. Using the IR imager, he zoomed in on the object and could see the ungainly bomb slung in the cargo bay. Without hesitation, he kicked in the S.R.B.s and the nearly twenty year old tav accelerated towards its target. At a range of about twenty km, he let fly four missiles. Travelling at hypersonic speeds, the K.K.V.s (kinetic kill vehicles) rocketed towards their target. Quickly, the first missile guided itself through the wing, while simultaneously the

second and third sliced through the cockpit and fuselage of the craft, impacting with the bomb. The rest of the plane, Tearle, and the last missile were atomized by the thermonuclear reaction that followed. It seemed the two rods created enough force to set up a chain reaction, causing initiation of fission. A huge spherical cloud of radioactive materials formed at the 15,000 meter flight path Tearle was on.

The burst took Louie by surprise. Desperately, he fought the Gs as he turned the craft 180 degrees away from the advancing E.M.P. Traveling as fast as they could in the planet's magnetic field, they overtook the craft, and the plane's avionics were temporarily overloaded with millions of gauss of electromagnetic radiation. Being built during the '30s, the **Eagle** was fortunately hardened. Registering the onslaught of the energy, the circuits protected themselves by disconnecting from the rest of the craft. Without computer control, the plane lost power and went into a stall. The G forces built up and Louie blacked out.

After registering the second pulse, the circuit breakers dutifully reached out and re-established links. After doing so, the "artificial intelligence" took stock of the situation. They found the tav in a lateral spin. They then asked the pilot subroutine to query the pilot as to whether this was desired or not. The subroutine replied the pilot was unconscious. According to program, the master routine took control and slowly brought the vehicle to level flight. Once stabilized, the medical routine administered the proper drugs to revive the pilot.

Groggy, Louie awoke to find himself flying away from the gargantuan cloud, and a few thousand meters below his previous level. "What happened?" he asked the cocom (cockpit computer).

"A nuclear airburst of 2.4 mt occurred, resultant E.M.P. caused the plane to protect itself. After precautions, plane brought to level and pilot revived," came the musical voice.

Louie surveyed the area, and little damage was done on the ground. He was relieved, for Tearle was gone without taking anyone else with him. Happily, he resumed course for the Cathedralis.

EPILOGUE

Cheryl, Joseph, and I linked our hands together in our backyard and looked upwards into the dark Linneatian sky. Scanning the sky, Cheryl eventually pinpointed the moving light against the background stars. "There honey, see it?"

"Yes," I nodded as I saw it quickly pass overhead. We waived goodbye. Goodbye to Louie and his rescuers, who had saved the world nearly 6 months ago. During the interim, he gathered all the remaining survivors - even Chloris, who was very, very, glad to be rescued. An argument broke out about what to do with the battered Linneatians. Eventually Louie agreed with Cheryl's proposal that we stay on and help Linneaus acclimate to the new ideas. Theseus even let Tristan go free to return to his devastated capitol. I helped Theseus establish a central government, to work out reconstruction of the north and to aid in advancing their society. The contamination issue was thus resolved by default. There simply was no alternative.

Cheryl had become pregnant, and we were hoping for a girl. As the ship went beyond the horizon, taking Louie and everyone else away, I reflected upon the promises and expectations that arose from our being here. Here was the chance to unify a world without the costly wars Earth experienced over centuries of trying. If only we had had such visitors during our civilization's growth, things might have been different with our first contact. But that being the case, I probably wouldn't be here, would I? I turned to my wife and looked at her carefully. My eyes focused on her bulging abdomen. To me, her pregnancy not only symbolized a newly developing Jaffrin, but it also signified the birth of a new society. As I lay my hand upon her womb, I felt the baby move. What new wonders lay ahead for us here, on Our home, Linneaus.

The Moralis a book novelette unfinished

PROLOGUE

8511 B.C.

The Third TF Task Force entered the Zantos star system expecting trouble. Twice before a task force was sent to investigate the whereabouts of the criminals they sought. But all previous attempts at subduing the enemy ended in the destruction of Terran forces shortly after both fleets arrived in the system. Admiral Lane, commanding this fleet, knew his prey was here. But where?

The system was known to contain five planets. Only three were present. Scanners indicated the second planet was capable of supporting life. Two asteroidal belts were encountered at the margins of the sun's gravitational influence where the former planets were located. The asteroids would serve as an effective mask for any hidden forces. The Admiral dispatched an invasion force to the second planet, and ordered the rest of his force to spread out and search the asteroid field for the enemy.

The man sitting in his chair looked at the defensive views with dismay. This time, they will get through, he knew. Still, he had not led a wholly unhappy life. Sure he made some mistakes, but they had valid reasons; or at least in his mind.

It was three years since the beginning of the war that led to his nation's defeat and his self-imposed exile. During the war he had done a great many deeds, and angered many friends. He did not want to be forgotten, not that he would. The odds are good he will be remembered as the most ruthless of leaders in all galactic time. That was not how he wanted to be remembered.

He did not have much time before his defenses were to be breached. He wanted everyone to know the full story of his actions. Possessed, he feverously began the task of dictating his memoirs. Ornako Zikorski will not be forgotten, he swore...

CHAPTER ONE

Ornako looked out the circular window, onto the landscape beyond. Scharoni was beautiful this time of year. It's light gravity and nourishing atmosphere allowed the treows to grow to great heights. They were in full bloom, being spring, and they blocked much of the light from the star Stuart, around which they orbited.

Stuart was a second generation star, nearing the end of its life cycle. In the past one hundred years, the solar constant (a measurement of the energy output of a star) had declined nearly seventeen percent. This prompted the Scharonians to expand their civilization to other solar systems, under the guise of a campaign to gain more Lebensraum. Two solar systems were thus colonized. Though they had twenty-two planets between them, only two were successfully Scharonized. It was on Scharoni that Ornako had been on a world already flourishing with life, unlike the barren colonies Crusader and Marder. Before their consolidation into the Alliance, they were devoid of life.

Those worlds were changed to meet the conditions most like that of Scharoni two hundred years before Stuart began its decline. The decline had been rapid and unforeseen. Normally, there were two major seasons; the ceald and the bearnan. During the ceald, the ocean froze and the people in ancient times went underground and hibernated like most of the life on the planet. This built in hibernation ability made the successful colonization of space efficient and easy on the passengers. Other beings feared this ability, for they could not see much sense in sending craft that took generations to reach their destination when Scharonians could sleep along the way.

After a period of several months, the planet warmed as it neared Stuart, the ice melted, leaving nearly ninety percent of the world covered by water. This intermediate stage did not last long. Scharoni is in a highly elliptical orbit, with Stuart as the extreme focus. The planet continued to near the star. At its closest approach, roughly eighty percent of the planet would be exposed as the water evaporated. This was the height of the bearnan season. During the period, water was scarce at ground level. But a few thousand feet in altitude lay the vapor, forming a perpetual cloud cover that lasted months. It was at this level that the treows would spread their canopy - their leaves collecting the vapor and processing the nutrients within. After its closest approach, the temperature would cool rapidly. The clouds would usually unload their substance at once in a torrent of activity, unleashing powerful storms, flooding the planet. Then it would freeze, completing the yearly cycle. This process repeated itself for many millions of years, until suddenly, to the behest of the Scharonians, it ceased. The output of Stuart dropped, and even during closest approach not all of the ice evaporated, leaving ice at the poles. In fact, the ice had mostly only melted, leaving the planet an ocean covered orb, skipping the bearnan season altogether. The ceald season became harsher than normal, and as the next year came after the change, it was obvious the planet was entering the proverbial ice age.

The Scharonians acted quickly to avert sure disaster. They genetically manipulated some plants to create much darker, ground hugging varieties. They were spread over the poles and helped to stem the advancing glaciers. Huge processing plants were set up to increase the carbon dioxide content of the atmosphere, creating a year-round greenhouse effect. The planetary environment stabilized and led to year round growth and the diversification of species. The resultant quantum explosion of diversity made for Scharoni being a galactical tourist attraction. No where in the galaxy was there known to be such a diverse and plentiful biotherm. The beauty of the planet was

renown throughout the galaxy. It was such a beautiful planet, that others wanted it for themselves for it's beauty and it's strategic location between the two biggest empires. Ornako could not imagine Scharoni under anyone else's control.

"General, you have a visitor," informed the robot.

"Well, just don't float there. Tell me who the hell it is?" Ornako instructed the managerial pau. He thought he saw the unit shudder and blink reactivity. Undoubtedly it must have been because of his swearing, he thought. The poor pau wasn't used to it.

"You're excellency, the Honorable Secretary of Domestic Affairs, Jugai Viloso, wishes an audience with you, Sir."

Why was Jugai here, wondered Ornako. Had he been found out? Whatever the reason, it must be very important, him showing up in person. From what Ornako remembered, Jugai likes to do business through pau links. The pau looked at him inquisitively.

"Well, what the hell are you staring at, egg face. Go and show him in," he commanded.

The spherical golem revolved a full 180 degrees, and with a jet of propellant, sped gracefully to the entrance whereby it granted entrance to the patiently waiting secretary. Once he was inside, the robot closed the door and bid Viloso to follow it. He did so accordingly.

Ornako heard the approachment of footsteps and turned to watch them enter. From around the bend popped the pau, closely followed by Jugai.

Jugai and Ornako knew each other from the aggressive campaign for more Lebensraum thirty years ago. It was during this expansionistic drive for solar systems that we became aware of each other's military achievements. We formed an alliance of highly ranking and distinguished officers. Soon after Marder and Crusader were colonized, the government ceased its expansionistic movement and offered our group a place in the government. It was an unhappy alliance. After the acquisition of the other systems, we stagnated while the other beings in the galaxy were expanding vigorously. Late last month the government was forced into a treaty with the other four major civilizations of the galaxy, or risk being surrounded by hostile nations. Many in our group felt our government was being sold out, with the inevitable resultant being the demise of our nation. It is thus some in our country want to overthrow the authorities. Ornako held such goals.

"General Zikorski, how are you?" he asked as he extended his hand to shake.

Ornako grasped his hand firmly. "I'm fine, and yourself?"

"I've good news Ornako. You were right, the leader didn't react. The treaty is reduced to its natural state--random particles scattered throughout the universe."

"Good. That should force our leader to react. For too long we have sat back and watched our nation plunge from number one to a third class nation state. That is not where we are meant to be. Number one is our rightful place in the galaxy!" exclaimed Ornako.

"Save that crap for later. You could be shot for talk like that," cautioned Jugai.

"I know. But given time, that too shall change."

"When? When we've been sent to Stuart for **redistribution**?"

The mentioning of **redistribution** alarmed Ornako. It is a religious ritual practiced by many Scharonians. It is a process by which a person can be "reborn". A person who has died is placed into an R.E. ship and sent into Stuart's outer atmosphere. There, the bodily remains are exposed to the vacuum of space as well as the heat from the star. This in effect cremates the being. After cremation, the ashes are scattered throughout the galaxy by the action of the solar wind as well as slighter gravitational attractions. It is hoped some of these ashes may land on a planetary body on which there is at least some primordial biologic activity. The ashes will aid the production of life. Not only does the consciousness get to experience traveling across the galaxy, but it gets to actually become part of a planet's ecosystem (gives new meaning to the term "living planet"). It is not something openly discussed in society. Something had to be wrong with him.

"How long have we known each other?" asked Ornako.

"Over thirty years."

"And do you remember how it used to be - before the present leader was installed?"

"Sure, it was great," conceded Jugai.

"How would you like to see a return to the ways of old?"

"I couldn't think of anything better?"

"What if I told you I am planning a coup?" Offered Ornako.

He started to laugh. "You? Be serious," he joked.

"I am," said Ornako forcibly.

Jugai's expression suddenly changed to a more somber one. "But how? There are agents everywhere."

"What they don't know won't hurt me, after all, I own most of the agents anyway."

"Do you have a big following?"

"Yes, I am the leader of the Aarion National Alliance (A.N.A.)." Ornako straightened proudly and proclaimed.

At the mention of the outlawed organization, Jugai's mouth dropped.

"You're the Usurper?" he asked cautiously.

"Who else is so clever," gloated Ornako freely.

"I thought I knew you better than this."

"What?" asked Ornako, aware of the sudden change in tone.

"I mean to attempt to overthrow the government. There are easier ways of going about it than that."

"Like being elected?" said Ornako sarcastically.

"Yeah."

"Oh be serious. You know damn well they'd just fudge the results."

"You're probably correct," confessed Jugai.

"So. Are you with me in this or not?"

"No, I'm sorry Ornako," he said as he produced a hand weapon, aimed at Ornako.

"What's the meaning of this?"

"Meaning? It means you have to die," threatened Jugai.

Ornako was confounded. He knew Jugai would try something, but he didn't think it would be so extremist. Well, he might as well find out why before putting the crews to him, thought Ornako. "But why? I trusted you. We were friends."

"That was a long time ago Ornako; before my pension ran out and I had to sell my 'services' to various organizations so I could support my family. Eventually the government found me out and offered a choice - turn or burn," he explained.

"You've changed. You never would have compromised your principles for a mark," observed Ornako.

"Right. And I didn't have to support three wives and seven kindren, either. But then what would you know about that, being alone all of your life," he raised the weapon at its target.

Ornako lunged at him, knocking the weapon out of Jugai's hands. Then six of his agents entered the room in support of Jugai.

"Hold it right there Ornako," one of them screamed, weapons trained on Ornako. "You see Ornako, this government cannot allow you to take it over. They've worked too hard to assure peace for our people. The age of militarism is over," he proclaimed.

"I think not," countered Ornako. "You see, there are more of us than you think." Alerted by the code, fifteen of his agents jumped from above, taking the police forces completely by surprise. A melee ensued. In the end, the government forces were rounded up and taken to the underground headquarters of the A.N.A.

Jugai glared at Ornako intensely.

"I should have known you'd be protected," he remorseful.

"Better luck next time. Of course, they won't be a next time," noted the general.

"What do you plan to do with them," asked the captive.

"Why kill them, of course."

"And me?"

"Ah yes. The two trillion mark question. I know how much you disliked the bearnan season of old, so I have planned a special going away ceremony for you. You see, I'm going to send you to Stuart for **reformation!**"

"No!" he screamed, his eyes afire. "You can't. Please, I beg of you -- anything but **reformation.**"

"You disgust me Jugai. A man of your stature should not have to beg."

"Think of the consequences. People will talk upon my disappearance and of the guards," he tried to reason with Ornako.

He merely laughed. "Do you actually think I would leave loose ends like that? Be serious. I have the Commander General in my pocket. Yours as well as the guard's

deaths will be the result of a shuttle crash or something." Ornako was unsure of how he was going to explain their deaths at this point in time.

"You'll never get away with this," hoped Jugai.

"Ah quite contrary. I not only shall get away with it, but I expect to benefit from it. And now my former friend, you have a launch scheduled in twenty minutes for your **reformation**. Good-bye." Ornako turned and left him to his forces.

CHAPTER TWO

Eighteen minutes later Jugai found himself perched atop the *prisoner reform ship* awaiting final countdown. Inside, he dismally surveyed his surroundings. He was naked and strapped in an inclined chair. There was a small window above his head through which he would see Stuart as he neared it. Other than that, the inside of the craft was barren and claustrophobic. The heat shield on the exterior of the vehicle was designed to protect the criminals from the damaging rays of the corona, and allowed the ship to penetrate to the depth where fusion occurred. There, the shield would be jettisoned, and the capsule and its solitary occupant would be nearly instantly fused together and burned as fuel. A residual amount remained that will eventually be spread across the universe. **Reformation** differed from **redistribution** in this sense: The criminal instead of being exposed to the outer corona and then taking their tour, are sent deep into the star where their respective elements are convected to the core where they form new elements, hence the name reformation. No one knows for sure what occurs after this process, but some leading philosophers believe it is possible that a reformer could eventually be redistributed across the universe, the resultant of a supernova explosion. Sometimes, however, the craft plummeted where a solar flare was erupting. When this happened, the craft would be deflected, causing an impartial burning. This allows some of the lighter elements of the body to be distributed throughout the galaxy sooner than would otherwise be the case. When this happens, it was looked upon as a sign of the criminal's innocence, whereby the prosecutor who ruled the defendant guilty was himself sentenced to reformation.

All this and more was on Jugai's mind, when he was suddenly thrust downward by the force of launch. He was now fourteen minutes from meeting his destiny. Quickly, the G forces built, and just as suddenly as they began it was over. He was now weightless, a most uncomfortable sensation to Scharonians.

Though accustomed to space travel, he had always been held by artificial gravity. The lack of it (among other reasons) prompted him to throw up, literally and figuratively. With no way of cleaning it, it floated about the cramped quarters, fowling the air. This was not a good thing. The Scharonians believed even the criminals were entitled to a

painless death. Suffocating from one's own puke was far from dignified, let alone painless. It was not long before he choked on the chunks and died, minutes before his ship entered Stuart. As it entered the outer atmosphere of the star, a huge flare erupted, deflecting the ship far off its programmed dive to the core. At the preset time, the outer shield was jettisoned, and Jugai's body exploded forth and returned to its natural state - a random splattering of complex hydrocarbon molecules, destined to roam the universe for a long, long time. And that was the end of him as far as Scharonians know. It was of little concern to his remains that back on Scharoni, his death was viewed as a mistake by Ornako.

It seemed like a bad omen to him. Ornako's nearing attempt at takeover would be in a precarious position after this incident, should word of his involvement leak out. Many of his government agents would just as soon not be loyal if anything went wrong. If he did not do something to rectify the coming crisis, they might turn against him. He had to act quickly to stave off such a fate. But what could he do? The answer came quickly. There will be a two pronged assault. First, he will convince members of the A.N.A. of the reasons for the intended reformation and the unfortunate redistribution. Then he will hold a press conference, explaining the unregistered launch of a prisoner reform ship, pinning it to a mob of sorts. Yes, it's coming together now, he thought proudly. The object of covering his tracks was now being twisted into a sinister plot on his part. Quickly, he rehearsed the plan. He'd call a press conference and pin the launch on his rivals the O.F.I. (Organization for Isolationism). Then he will announce the shocking news that the launch was of a prisoner reform ship destined to reform someone, rather than the redistribution ship as it appeared to be. At roughly the same time, he will have his stooges in the Intelligence Department announce the disappearance of Jugai. The press will obediently put two and two together, and bingo: The O.F.I. looks bad. He will have a field day exposing all of the public relations distributed by them. That will definitely put the nix on them, hoped Ornako. The mere thought of the destruction of the O.F.I. sent a shiver throughout me. Ornako hastily began preparing for the show, gloating over my believed "fruits of destiny".

CHAPTER THREE

An hour later Ornako arrived at the A.N. A. party headquarters, awaiting his introduction to the assembled officers. It was very noisy, with all of the representatives milling about discussing the probable content of his upcoming speech. When Ornako's number two man strode briskly onto the elevated stage, the talking ceased and everyone took their seats. Clearing his throat, the man introduced his leader.

"It is with honor and trust that I present to you our leader: Ornako Zikorski!" he yelled. As if on cue, which it was, the crowd rose to its feet and began chanting.

"Or-na-ko, Our Lea-der! Or-na-ko, Our Lea-der!" The air was electric. Ornako waited a few seconds, so as to allow the chanting to grow louder and more demanding. As soon as it was scheduled, he walked briskly onto the stage. The chanting stopped and he could hear the distinctive click of heels accompanying their carefully orchestrated salute. Ornako continued his walk towards the podium, aware that all eyes were focused intensely upon himself, their chosen leader.

Ornako had not volunteered for the position of leader, let alone actively campaigned for it. Yet it was he, above all others, that was chosen to lead. This trust and expectation they had of him changed Ornako greatly. He gained awe inspiring energy from a crowd, and became obsessed not with what was right for the group, rather on personal glorification. Like all successful leaders, he had convinced the alliance that what was good for him was great for them.

THE TIME OF PERICULUM

MICHAEL JEFFREY SLEBODNICK

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DEDICATION

This book is dedicated to the administrative staff, aides, counselors, professors, and teachers, of the American public education system. Through my entire educational experience, I was always challenged, or given the freedom, to be creative. It is my hope that this system continues to retain caring, competent, energetic, enthusiastic, and supportive personnel. Our future generation's education will depend on it.

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made the effort when no one else would. Her encouragement and enthusiasm for my work knew no bound.

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Many thanks have to be extended to Helen Pedersen for her close friendship.

My love goes out to Christine Collins. The love we shared will be cherished by me forever. My offer still stands. Above all others, this dedication goes out to her.

DEDICATION

This book is dedicated to all of my friends: past, present, and future. It has been said that a person can be judged by the company one keeps. I have been extremely fortunate to have had friends of the high quality and caliber that they poses. I hope I have been able to do for them what they have for me. They will not be forgotten.

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competent, energetic, enthusiastic, and supportive personnel. Our future generation's education will depend on it.

AUTHOR'S NOTE

This book is foremost a work of fiction. The events displayed in this novel are fictitious. The author does not imply that the events portrayed therein are his view of how the future should unfold. In fact, the author hopes that by reading this story the kind of future presented here may be avoided.

It is through education that change is brought to the landscape. By educating ourselves on one possible future as played out here, we can avoid the traps and pitfalls of continuing things along the status quo as they are now. But if things continue as they are (socio-economic regression of the cities, rise of militias, increased dichotomy between the have and have-nots, heightened racial tensions), then the future does not bode well for this great experiment in freedom and democracy that has endured civil war, ethnic strife, and social injustices of the past and present. Nothing is cast in stone. We have the tools to change and shape the future. Should the future unfold as presented here, then we have our ¹ignorance and bigotry to blame. There is no excuse for terrorism!

THE

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**JAFFRIN
CHRONICLES**

2041-2054

MICHAEL JEFFREY SLEBODNICK

©1996

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I must express deep adoration and many loving thanks to Christine Rosan Collins for her love and tenderness. No one has loved me as much before or since. She will always be remembered for her great friendship and her playful nature. Anytime, anywhere, you want the ring for real, my offer still stands, as does my love for Christine. Thank you.

DEDICATION

This book is dedicated to the administrative staff, aides, counselors, professors, and teachers, of the American public education system. Through my

entire educational experience, I was always challenged, or given the freedom to be creative. It is my hope that this system continues to retain the caring, competent, energetic, enthusiastic, and supportive personnel. Our future generation's education will depend on it.

AUTHOR'S NOTE

This book is foremost a work of fiction. The events displayed in this novel are fictitious. The author does not imply that the events portrayed therein are his view of how the future should unfold. In fact, the author hopes that by reading this story the kind of future presented here may be avoided.

It is through education that change is brought to the landscape. By educating ourselves on one possible future as played out here, we can avoid the traps and pitfalls of continuing things along the status quo as they are now. But if things continue as they are (socio-economic regression of the cities, rise of militias, increased dichotomy between the have and have-nots, heightened racial tensions), then the future does not bode well for this great experiment in freedom and democracy that has endured civil war, ethnic strife, and social injustices of the past and present. Nothing is cast in stone. We have the tools to change and shape the future. Should the future unfold as presented here, then we have our ²ignorance and bigotry to blame. There is no excuse for terrorism!

Character Name: **Slevoct**

Race: Mixed Heritage (+6) Vulcan/Tellerite heritage

Age = 48 Vulcan years at the time of the original series (so he might be old now, even by Vulcan standards). I can adjust this a bit.

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Racial advantages/disadvantages

Attributes:

- Fitness +1 Strength
- Coordination +1 Reaction
- Intellect +1
- Presence
- Psi +2

Skills

- Culture +1 (Vulcan/Tellerite)
- World Knowledge (Vulcan and Colony IX on former planet of Loki)
- Mind Meld 3
- Language Vulcan and Tellerite
- Science Geology & Archeology
- Professor Institute for Psionic learning on Andros 4

Typical advantages/Disadvantages

- Argumentative -1
- Night vision +1
- Hides emotions -1
- Code of honor -3
- Aggressive -2

Overlay

- Scientist and colonizer

Early life history:

- Failed colony
 - Planetside survival +1
 - Vitality edge +1
 - Alertness +1
 - Vengeful -2 towards Axanari (they invaded his colony when still a child)
- Religious/ideological training
 - Pacifism -1 towards those whom are no threat to himself
 - Willpower +3
 - Telepathic resistance +4
 - Fanatic -3 (a devout follower of ancient Sudoc ideals, including free melding, and the pleasures of practicing psionics.
 - Culture +3 Sudoc follower

Starfleet Academy History

- Colonization school
 - Geophysics +2
 - Archeology +2
 - Planetary Survival +2

Reknown =1

Courage points +3

Misc

- Species enemy -3 (Axnari)
- Mind Meld +3
- Mind Shield +2
- Mind Control +1 (+2 if used against an inferior species)
- Tricorder +2
- Phaser 1
- Use of the Rod of Kel +1
- Other sinister psionic abilities

Other

- Fat -1 to agility
- empathy -2
- sworn enemy -1 (a member of the Vulcan Council)

OK, you've seen the stats, now lets delve more deeply into the life and times of the character named "**Slevoct**"

Slevoct is the odd result of a chance encounter between a Vulcan scientist and a Tellerite engineer. It was an odd occasion, as you might come to guess. See, the two progenitors of Slevoct had the same keen interest in an archeological dig on a backwards planet, of little strategic value to really anyone. The planet itself (Loki), was of little significance, being far from any trade routes, and yet, it was a class M planet, that was strangely uninhabited. Now, if it's a class M planet, that usually is indicative of life being there. Sure enough, the place teemed with life. And yet, there were no people on it. Not humans, nor vulcans, romulans, gorns, orions, Andorians, klingons, hydrans, kzinti, really, none of the major civilizations of the galaxy. From the surface of things, it looked like a planet primed for colonization. And so, these two scientists, one a Vulcan (Stevop) and one a Tellerite (Phobo), were scanning an odd reading from beneath their feet, when all of a sudden their tricorders picked up the unmistakable signs of a power emanation. The duo traced out the direction the source was coming from, and they followed the trail the instrument laid out for them. After a few minutes of walking, they came upon an opening in the bedrock that was exposed at the base of a huge granitic mountain. The power was coming from within the opening.....

Fast forward a few years.....

Slevoct was a fine teenage boy, of mixed heritage, whom had excellent vision and superb psionic skills. His father Stevop was on the Vulcan Science Council, and was the head of the colonization effort for planet Loki. His mother, Phobo, was an outstanding engineer, whom was in charge of powering the colony on Loki. Colony IX

was coming along nicely, being one of the few habitable planets in the region. There were no wormholes, only vast quantities of gas and dust, left behind from a supernova explosion some years ago. A neutron star was only a few light years away. The yellow star with which Loki revolved around, was in typical middle age. Plenty of life left in that star system, to say the least. Slevoct was behaving normally, and spent many hours developing his psionic abilities. They seemed to come natural to him, and his parents encouraged him greatly. They routinely mind melded with him, in an effort to further strengthen his skills. They would turn it into a contest, to see whose willpower was the greatest, and whom would be the loser whom broke down first. Needless to say, most of the battles were won by his father, but Slevoct was able to usually beat his mother in the mind games. But, like all children that are different, he was constantly teased by his peers, because he looked and acted different than the rest. So, occasionally, he would attempt to do some mind control over his opponents, much to the chagrin of the school officials.

"Your young man is much too free with his mind", they would say to his parents. Many stern warnings were issued afterwards, and usually there was a trip to the high priest of the system to try to talk some sense into him. They tried to explain to him that mind melding was something only consenting people do, and never with a non-vulcan. So, he was disciplined regularly. In fact, after a number of such thumpings, he began to resent very much the infringement on his behavior. In a non typical Vulcan way, he began to become more and more removed from the study of Surak, and instead, began to study the ancient history more. In particular, he focused in on the master of psionics in ancient Vulcan, Sudoc. The more he got punished, the more he studied, and the more he came to believe that maybe Sudoc was the proper way to live ones life.

Sudoc was an ancient and powerful master of Vulcan in the ancient times. He was supremely skilled at psionics, and would have high priests train him often to keep his mind sharp. He forced many deep scans on all his inner circle, and ruled by terror and fear of his powerful mind. It was a dark time in Vulcan history, a subject Vulcans do not like to speak about at all. This was before Surak, and the teachings of logic, peace, and controlled emotions. During Sudoc's time, vulcans were ruled by their emotions, and there were numerous wars. During this time, the Vulcans were much like their offshoots, the Romulans, whom are widely believed to have fled Vulcan because of the teachings of Surak. Eventually, a great battle ensued, and Sudoc dies of a massive brain hemorrhage, caused by too many mind control attempts. But, it is rumored, that there still exists, somewhere in the galaxy, a small subset of high priests that still hold Sudoc dear to their hearts, and secretly practice his style of psionics. It is said, those whom follow his teachings, know more ways to control minds than the high priestess of Vulcan herself. But they all live in limbo, in the shadows, too afraid of persecution were they to surface.....

So, instead of curtailing his efforts, Slevoct did the opposite, and practiced his craft out in the open, in public, for the amusement of others, much to the despair of whomever was his unfortunate victim. No one really knew how to control him, and because of his growing power, little thought came to those whom were fearful of him, other than to give him wide shrift. He began to get a reputation for shrewdness and also cunning, which

probably came from the genetics of his brilliant progenitors. Still, by the time Slevoct was ready to enter the Academy, he was primed and ready to learn all that he could.

The Vulcan Science Academy on Colony IX was a small one, by even outpost standards. There were only a few students, and the course offerings were quite small—they ranged from archeology to zoography. After a few years of deciding on a major, he transferred to Andros 4, a prestigious institute well known throughout the sector. Slevoct chose a double major, and did his doctoral thesis on the “Astro-Geological causes of finite movement and differentiation within the core of an Asteroidal remnant orbiting Andros 4”. What was really remarkable about the doctoral thesis, was that Slevoct was able to calculate that the inner core of the asteroid was hollow. Now, this by itself, is very unusual. Planetoids and asteroids do not have hollow bodies, they come solid, firm, and secure. Yet, this one asteroid, within the system, was hollow, at least to him. As you can imagine, he had to vigorously defend his thesis, which was finally granted, but still disagreed with, by the faculty at the Andros 4 Institute. They were so impressed with his performance, they offered him a tenured teaching position within 2 ½ years, an unheard of rate of attainment.

Fast forward to age 37

The last few meters of the boring were nearing completion. Soon, 10 years of research and fellowship money were to come to fruition. Slevoct was nearly at his goal.

He pressed down on the geoprobe, and it bit into the surrounding material. Here, in the middle of an asteroid, he was drenched in sweat, fogging his helmet, which protected him from the vacuum of space that was now the long tunnel leading to the surface. This was no ordinary archeological dig. Not even a normal geological dig. Rather, this was the culmination of his efforts to understand the anomaly at Asteroidal remnant AS001x3 around Andros 4. Slevoct checked his tricorder readings – the power emanations were getting stronger. Whatever was causing the readings must be artificial, he assured himself. Deeper, the drill tore apart the rock, vaporizing it instantly, leaving only dust and debris to float beyond. There, what was that, he asked himself? The drill stopped, with a red light flashing quickly, to be replaced with a computer voice.

“Warning, unknown metallic object impacted,” said the female voice. “Suggest scan prior to continuing,” it continued

“OK, in works,” said Slevoct. His breathing increased. He was here, in the middle of an asteroid, where no one had been before, or at least, not for a long time, he theorized. The tricorder whirled to life, and he noticed the unmistakable signature of transparent aluminum, a super strong alloy. This is it, he thought.

“Computer, resume drill,” he ordered.

The drill spun up to full power, and tore into the metal. Within seconds, it had breached an opening and the automatic safety system shut it off.

“Operation complete”, said the computer.

Slowly, Slevoct peered inside the hole. He was astonished by what he saw.....

A humanoid figure, inanimate, was sitting in a chair, surrounded by computers which were still operating. Anxious, Slevoct pulled himself through the small opening the drill had created, and poked his head inside. "Computer, scan for life forms" he commanded.

"Complete. One lifeform, dead," was its reply.

Wow, he thought. This is fantastic. What stories could this figure tell, if only it were alive.....

He pressed further into the void, which began to look more and more like a bridge of a warship, than anything else. Could this be a Jindarin Ship, of which was rumored to exist?

"Computer, scan lifeform. What is he?" he asked.

A different whine emerged from his tricorder, and the results were displayed on his helmet up display (HUD).

Slevoct let out a breath, and his heart stopped for a few seconds it seemed.

"My god", was all he could say.....

(It is within this context that I have lots to say more about the planet Vulcan, and followers of Sudoc. In fact, the figure in this battlebridge of sorts, is a former commander of Sudocs and mysteriously disappeared millenia ago. Hes not a major major figure, but an intersting archeological one, to say the least. Needless to say, it is within this enclosure, that Slevoct finds recordings of an ancient battle between the forces of Sarek and Sudoc in this area. It is also here, that Slevoct finds many artifacts of ancient Vulcan, some of which deal with very old psionic weapons, long since banned by Vulcan. Imagine how Slevoct will use these weapons in your campaign.....Slevoct becomes a fanatic in regards to learning as much as possible about Sudoc and how he ruled..... (there is chance someday might become a meglmaniac)

Fast forward more years.

Now a prestigious professor (not just a peon anymore), Slevoct is doing well. He has continued to develop, now in secret, his mind further, and to experiment with his new found relics. In order to not let anyone know of his discovery, great that it is, he reseals the bridge he found (after plundering it of all its recordings and valuables and, of course, ancient weapons, and publishes a new report, entitled "Mysterious geophysical anomaly turned Minor," whereby he actually refuted his own thesis of so many years ago.

Fast forward a few more years.

The federation had still encounters with the Axnari. Most were friendly, but some were downright awful. One day, he was speaking with his folks, when, all of a sudden, the comm line went dead. This happens sometimes, but not always the case. So, he tried to re-establish a link with his folks, and was shocked to see, not his parents, but rather a building full of invaders, all of whom looked like Axnari. The line was open, and he could see dim figures in the distance of the colony headquarters on Colony IX of Loki, where his parents were still very much alive and in control of. So, he watched intently on the screen, powerless to do anything, as he saw soldier after soldier fire on the staff, and the disintegration of their bodies as they were swept by phaser fire set to kill. Imagine the horror, when he even saw his own parents simply vanish from existence..... Anger consumed him. He blamed all Axnari for their deaths. He became aggressive and vengeful, especially towards any Axnari. There were a few Axnari on campus, and you can imagine their fate. It was not murder, but you could get the impression, that these few Axnari seemed to have such bad luck, such as bad scores on tests, no friends, no promotions, never were able to defend their thesis successfully, etc. No one knew, but he had sabotaged all of their brains, using the psionic devices he found in that asteroid.

Of course, to those whom were his friends, Slevoct was a great person to be with. He was very honorable, a little aggressive, but preached pacifism, except towards Axnari. In fact, it was, his open protests in favor of a war between the federation and them that eventually led to his dismissal and removal from the institute.

So, this brings us to today, where a middle aged Slevoct, is looking for work on a starship, hoping to seek out new archeological sites, all the while, secretly, plotting to get revenge on the Axnari, and to find more powerful weapons for himself.

OK, that about does it for my character. This is Michael Jeffrey Slebodnick, 3 April, 2003 writing in response to a query regarding character generation. I hope you found this background interesting. My phone number is 810 287 4285, if you need it. I do hope my character Slevoct will be acceptable to you, and I think you can see I have put a lot of thought into the development of my character.

<<UCIP communications>>>

Academy Exam Part # 2

Stardate 24****.**

Intention to become the Chief Science Officer/U.S.S. Camelot
Slevoct

The following document is my sample log in reference to the letter dated <<12 April 2003>>.

Ah, Romulan Ale, Slevoct remarked to himself. Being at an Ambassadorial Reception does have its privileges, he figured, as he willfully took another sip from the glass. Most Vulcans do not appreciate a fine drink such as he was partaking. However, Slevoct was no ordinary Vulcan, for he had a bit of Tellerite in him. In fact, not only did he have Tellerite blood running through his veins (along with a few percent alcohol), he was also a follower of Sudoc. Slevoct did not subscribe to the notion that logic should dictate everything, that emotions were to be controlled and suppressed. Slevoct enjoyed life and what it has to offer. One can easily tell that by his bulging abdomen, a sign of overindulgence, of glutany, which was quite un-Vulcan like. Still, unless someone got to actually know him, they would think he was like most Vulcans.

Llazily, Slevoct looked around the lounge. Dignatories were evident everywhere. He scanned the crowd, non-chalantly, not really interested in what was taking place. Occasionally, he met eyes with a few of the ambassadors, and their staff, but for the most part, he just quickly glanced at them, then moved on to the next group of conversationalists. To him, diplomacy was a bore. It was better to act rather than spend hours in a debate society, with little gain to show for it. Still, Slevoct was not unaccustomed to being in diplomatic circles. But for some unfathomable reason, they usually didn't end up very cordially.

Centurians, Deltans, Regulians, Orions, Andorians, most of the species of the Federation were present, all in their own little groups, with a group of four Orions being very obviously ignored by the others. It was widely known that most Orions were merchanairy and pirate like. Slevoct regarded their group with suspicion. Although the Orions were not Axnaris, they have been known to sometimes frequent with Axnari, and that was a very unpleasant thing to Slevoct. His eyes scanned the Orions, from one person to the next. When he got to the fourth Orion, immediately, Slevoct picked up a sense of nervousness and uneasy from the subject he was studying. The Orion's eyes were constantly darting back and forth, and he seemed to be always clutching some object at his right hip. Patiently, Slevoct watched this Orion, a burly, bear of a man, maybe $1\frac{1}{3}$ times as big as Slevoct. The subject kept glancing towards the head ambassador from Andoria.

The blue skinned, antenna sprouting ambassador, was clearly the senior most member, judging from the way others constantly bowed towards the man in a showing of respect. Slevoct wondered why the Orion would be so interested in the Andorian.

Ok, stop here. From here, describe how to see the item which is thought to be a weapon. Then, describe how he sees the orions making threatening gestures, then pointing to the andorian ambassador. It is then that slevoct sees what might be a weapon. Alarmed, slevoct quickly runs through several scenarios.

2 ways

1psionically scan the orion. He can, because he doenst follow strict Vulcan ruiles

2 maybe step over to ther ambassador and begin talking to him, just to act as a blocker to the orions

3 slowly walk away, but maiitain range within a short easily to reach distance from the amabassadror

4. the orion moves towards the ambassador

5. safety of the ambassador at stake
6. move towards intercepting the orion before the strike
7. come from behind the orion, then accidentally back into him, spilling drink on his cloak.
8. orion spins around, wondering what was going on
9. help clean off cloak, trying to feel for weapon
10. turns out, no weapon, just x
11. embarrasses, apologizes, and orders more ale for the orion
12. sit back down, and wonders why he was so convinced there was going to be harm, when in fact now
13. still suspicious though

There was a girl named Heather
Whom made my trip much better
She was cuter than a bug
Of whom I'd love to give a hug
To dissect Rats she may like
I for one can't imagine the sight
Of gum she loves to chew
She wore cute brown shoes
She just turned 21
And entertaining her was such fun
When I think of a girl named Heather
Of the following is what I learned
We both share eyes of green and blue
She like me wore braces
And neither of us like NASCAR races
Of her smile that was so warm
And she loves to eat lucky charms
Heather like me loves school
With a 3.6 I think she's cool
To be an MD is her quest
I know she will give all her best
And if you love this ode
I hope you don't puke at the commode
For Christmas she got an IPOD
Hasn't technology changed since the days of houses of sod
Of hair we both have brown
Though hers was more than long
Sometime soon this poem may be a song
On her eyes she wore contacts to see the light
To me she was a beautiful sight
Her teeth were so bright
Of this I think might
That to entertain her would be my delight
And if you so desire
Of you I would admire

So with this poem I close
For your great smile
This poem I composed
So thanks for giving your phone a flip
And thinking of me so quick
So please do call again
Your friend Slebodnick!!

***There was a girl named Lindsay
Who works at a coffee place
I go there to see her smiling face
And for her a heart I'd trace♥***

***To study Public Policy
She goes to OSU
And so it goes with me too
Though I study Science Ed
I'm so glad to spend
A few brief moments
Talking with you***

***And so this poem ends
With me giving to you
A gentle green candela
With aroma sweet like you
And a little bunny
With the hope someday
You'll be my honey***

***With Love
Michael – 541 829 1936***

There was a girl named Sabrina
To a coffee shop I go to see 'ya
To buy chocolate milk I might
But reason real is
To see your pretty sight
And now that the semester is to close
I hope this letter shows
That to you I would admire
For me I hope you desire
And keep this in mind
I'd love you to find
That a day with me is fun
And that you are my kind
With blonde hair like sun



Next time I'll tip you a Dime
And it is my dream
That someday soon
You'll be mine
Love
Michael-Jeffrey
829-1936

29 May 2005
To end life
Thought I
On times many
Ever wonder why?
For all I seek
Is the love
I had and lost
Of the kind I was shown
By a woman named Christine
Who was not mean
Nor was she bitter
Rather
She was all the love I have ever known
In this tapestry of life you have sown
There have been so many women
I would love to have married
From Trisha Crail
To Michelle Hall
To Kelly Bishop
Through Helen and Carrie
On to Christine
Next to Jennifer
And Katie from up north
Then came Lauren
Whom I knew before I met her
I thought I'd be spending my life
With her as my wife
Then there was Heather
Who didn't bother to call
Now there's Sabrina
Whom I'd love too
But as long as every day is without
The kind of love I had once and lost
Then this life you have given me
Seems pointless and not to be
For there can be no greater gift

Than to have a woman to give love to
And no amount of money, fame or fortune
Will ever make up
For the soft kiss of a beautiful woman
And so I go on
Wondering things about
Like when my wife
Will come about
For I get older every day
And like Christine Duncan once said
I am getting old
Too old for those I desire
To regain what I had when I was in my twenties
And to have a family while
I am still have life left to smile
As I watch our kids explore
Without which life is a bore

And since going nuts
Now ten years gone by
I have come to realize
That nothing in this world is as it seems
That life itself is like much
A story that has been written before
And this script as such
Leaves little choice
In the grand scheme of things
And yet, of a this I dream
Of giving some cute loving chick a ring
And of the many times before
I had the chance to show
My love to the women named above
And yet, there still is choice
For they choose wrong
For they are here
With me I wish they were so near
As they still are to this day
Quite to my heart dear
And were they here today
Of this I would say
To be with you I would dare
And marry you I'd swear
If they were here to give me the love
I so need to have
And even more
To give

And on the subject
To this I would not object
That you have given me the chance
To succeed so many times before
And I had been a disappointing boy
With all the job I lost and quit
You were there for the most part
With even better plans to start
And I wonder now
I life would have been
Had I followed the right path
And became a teacher a decade or more ago
Which brings me back to choice
Though things may be written in stone
The choices we make along the road
Affect and widen the path
And yet
Eventually, though we stray
To the end come we may
Though life may be some elaborate trick
Or something the mind has made up
The true reality may be this
Life is a game
And how you play it
Determines whether you make
And journey through this sim
Question what is on the other end
And of the ultimate question of all
For the universe is built for life
As I do suspect
Given the laws of the universe
Could there be a multiverse?
For life itself
May be no different to it
Than the building of a planet, moon, or star
For if atoms can come together to form these
Then life seems only natural
To be here there and everywhere
The basic building blocks are
And thus way me think]
Of a universe full of life
From corner to corner
If there is such a thing
Which brings this poem full circle
For isn't it unique
That physics and chemistry would be just right

To allow the formation of life
And be that as it may
Then the very purpose of the cosmos itself
Is to give rise to life
And wouldn't it be a shame
Through war we aimed
To annihilate from this place
The human race
So it must be our quest
To end now this madness
Of killing each other
Be it war, crime, or hate
And come to understand
That we are all one and the same
Each one linked to the rest
In this ancient race
To understand us all
And to realize we are so small
When compared to the cosmos above
And yet we humans dumb we are
For we have been told from a voice from afar
Some two millennia ago
To embrace one another
In unity and peace
And how sad he must be
To see all that has transpired
In the name of king and country
Since records began
And though he may try again and again
To show us the outrage that is war
Through photos, print, and lore
And by building destructive weapons more
To make war unthinkable,
There are those whom still adore
The concept of war
And to these evil men I say
You are not human
No way
For all through history god has shown
With each new weapon
The means to kill more
That it is a warning to us all
That with the advent of the bomb
To many physicists it was to cease all wars
Surely now, they thought
That war couldn't start

Yet just in the past 60 years
Since the horror of Hiroshima and Nagasaki
There have been many unspeakable deeds
In Korea, Vietnam, Iraq, Kuwait, Rwanda, India, Cambodia, Bosnia, Kosovo, and of
course the wars of Arab and Israelis
You would think by now
That with TV and media
We would outgrow
Our foolish needs to conquer
And that we would all come to live
In one world in peace and harmony
Which would be a gift from us
To other worlds

**The Light Turns on
A Hope for the Planet
Michael Jeffrey Slebodnick
29 August 2006**

The land beyond the cities
As it was once known
To my forefathers forefathers
Was a land of fear and danger
Where beasts and wild animals
Lay in wait
Where travel was difficult
And men lurked hidden
Taking refuge from control
Or maybe just working
For some other form
Of dubious value
The feudal governor

This place beyond the cities
Was called the wilderness
It was a place not fit for men
It was a place to be taken
And tamed
it was a place to grow
both horizontally
and agriculturally
and with that growth
fueled more people
and more people

more demand for stuff

the wilderness then was looked at anew
no longer was it a place to be feared
now it was place for profit
be it timber
minerals
or soil
the wilderness soon gave way
to the plow
the fire
or the shovel
soon even the very ground
was seen as a commodity
for coal was king
and my ancient relatives
worked its seams
to fuel an economy
over there
across the wide ocean
seemingly far
yet danger was soon to prowl

There was a place
Where there was harmony
Where man lived not just with nature
But as an integral part of it
In this place
Humans and life
Flourished
Where each member
Of the great cosmos
Knew its part
With proper respect
Each member had
For the roles each other
Played

In this vast land
There was no concept
That nature was to be tamed
Or that a profit could be had
This world view held
The ideals originally held
That no one owns the land

Rather we are part of the land
And the land is part of us
And that there should be balance
Between man and the rest of the world
That no one should use more than one needs
Leave some for the birds, the bear, or the bees

Like thunder from above
These two worlds collided
From the other side of the ocean
The first contact was made
And this place
Hasn't been the same

For from afar
Those people came
And they brought their view
And to them this land
Was theirs to take
In the name of God or country
Or heavens sake

When they saw this place
They were overwhelmed
And were it not for the help
Of those here before them
The fledgling nests
Would soon have been deserted

These two peoples
Soon learned to clash
Not just for war
But how they thought
Of this world
And how it should be sought
For to those here before
The alien life
With ideals of control
Both physical and governmental
Seemed to act quite temperamental

To those new to this place
How vast and wild it seemed
A place with timber galore
And a place to conquer
And even plunder

Where the very word of nature
Soon meant limitless amounts
Of vast forest and mineral resources
To be bargained for
Or worse

The ever spreading nests
Like some plague of alien invaders
Soon covered the land
And cut down its forests
For profit motive
To be shipped overseas
As payment for taxes

Over time
There were more clashes
For reasons a plenty
The ones here first
Soon found they weren't many

Over a brief time
Less than 9 generations
The fledgling nests
Crossed the land
Where there was once virgin forest
Whom fell to the new invaders
There were now fields aplenty
Of monotypic desolation
With no biodiversity
And even less pests
Soon there was a new word
For those into lexicons
Urban sprawl
Free market economics
And technological progress
All three of which
The forest and prairies they ate

There was a third view
Unnoticed by the alien invaders
But known deep down to those
Whom lived off the land
And were here the first
And that view held
A disquieting message
That something was amiss

In this land once paradise
Toads had 3 legs
Bird's eggs were cracking
Due to DDT and the rest
Of the farmer's friend
But no friend to this view
Was the idea of mans chemistry

Of lakes gone dead
Or fish too poisonous to eat
Of life forms gone extinct
Of rising temperatures aplenty
And storms acting as natures sentry
Causing us to wake up
And take notice
Of the changes being done
Not just to the wilderness
But to man himself

For the new man
There are signs everywhere
Of things gone wrong
All of his doing
Be it a hole over your head
Or dead forests from too much
Acid in the rain
Of lakes gone dead
Or bloomed out of control
Too much acid or too much nitrates
And what about the nights
Do you hear the coyotes
Yelping in the night
Asking you to make things right

The changes are here
Just ask the hardware store
When is the last time
You had to shovel a big snowfall
And have you noticed
How soon the flowers pop up

There are places far away
That were once wet
With annual monsoons
And people slept
Now those place are dry

And so to are the dreams
For there is no more rain
For planting crops
And hunger made them wept

With six ½ billion now
This planet is abuzz
The free market is everywhere
And demand for land
Is ever going up
At what price is there to pay
To keep the spread
While great for the economy
For us and our kids
What will be here
7 generations from now
what world will be left
what life there shall be
for not just you and me
but for all living things
for now is the time
for the two worlds to come together
not in a collision of force
rather in cooperation
for the ones here first
have much wisdom to teach
about the earth
and not just to each other
but to reach out to help one another
not just here
but all over this world
for what was evident
to those here first
is that we are all related
not just us human beings
but to the bird, the bee, and the beetle
we are all connected
what we do unto others
we do unto ourselves
and each time a species dies
we lose ourselves again
what cures could be held
or what part of the web of life
did that strand just unwind
for like a ball of twine
with each unraveling of a strand

the whole ball becomes unstable
and soon it collapses
to be unsustainable
just how much string will it take
for us to lose each day
realize our errors
and soon we must make
that critical leap
at which point in this endangered course
must the bulb turn on
to do our part
to save ourselves
not just for us
but for the eagle

now is the time
before its too late
for those here first and last
to come together
and pull the switch
and create in humanity
that which wisdom has taught us
to restore the balance
and learn from those first here
to them we must hear
that the end not be near
if only we make that switch
to think of our part
not as rulers of the earth
but in all actuality
just a bit part
that this great place
has been here long before us
and can continue long without us
so we should chose
to light that bulb
and turn on the switch
to care for one another
and not make war
but to live in peace
as part of a greater whole
of which we are just a piece
at what point now
will you do your part
you can begin
right at home yourself

by more than metaphorically
recycle that can
reuse that paper
do your part to pollute less often
to use sustainable practices
turn down the heat
drive efficiently
use less water in the house
turn off the light
doing all these things
or making whatever changes you can
to save one another
not just for you or I
for the gases we produce
each time we take our hour long commute
will still be in the air
long after we're dead
even a little bit now
can add up
and teach your children too
to conserve and recycle
and soon you will see
if we all do our part
that by turning off the lights
we have turned on our own light